

Central University of Europe/Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals
Master-Thesis

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of
Erasmus Mundus Masters Program in Public Policy

Assessing the Influence of Right-Wing Alternative Media Outlets
on the Policy Agenda of Ideologically Aligned Parties
– The Case of the AfD during the
2022-23 Berlin State Election Campaign

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Program:	Mundus MAPP
Term:	Summer 2024
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Submission date:	31.07.2024
Words:	16,316

Abstract: This thesis investigates the influence of right-wing alternative media on the policy agenda of ideologically and politically aligned parties, focusing on the 2022-23 Berlin state election campaign and the local branch of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland). By employing *process tracing*, the study examines whether and how selected right-wing alternative media outlets and AfD-affiliated social media accounts engaged in both *agenda setting* and *agenda building*, with an emphasis on key issues such as migration, climate protests, and cultural conflicts. The findings suggest a coordinated effort between the media and the AfD, both jointly engaging in *agenda setting* by promoting specific topics and narratives and one media outlet, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, also partially shaping the party's agenda. The research provides insight into the mechanisms of media influence in political campaigns, highlighting the crucial role that right-wing alternative media play in shaping public discourse and political strategies in modern elections. The study contributes to the broader understanding of interactions between media and politics, particularly within the context of right-wing populism and extremism.

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List of Abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland/Alternative for Germany
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union/Christian Democratic Union of Germany
DDT	Doubly-Decisive Test
DFB	Deutscher Fussball Bund/German Football Federation
DW	Deutsche Welle
EIC	Editor-in-Chief
FDP	Freie Demokratische Partei/Free Democratic Party
JA	Junge Alternative/Young Alternative
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexuell/Transgender and Intersexual
LGBTQIA*	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual/Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual
MP	Member of Parliament
NYE	New Year's Eve
NYU	New York University
PEGIDA	Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes/Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West
PI-News	Politically Incorrect News
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
PSM	Public Service Media
RAF	Rote Armee Fraktion/Red Army Faction
RBB	Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg
SGT	Smoking-Gun Test
SITWT	Straw-in-the-Wind-Test
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands/Social Demoratic Party of Germany

1. Introduction

In December 2022, the murder of a 14-year-old-girl by an asylum seeker in the small village of Illerkirchberg in southwestern Germany sparked a fierce political debate about the deportation of so-called *dangerous people* and criminal offenders to Afghanistan, a practice that had been discontinued since the Taliban took over of the country the year before. At the time, the Ministry of the Interior rejected these demands, citing the dangers that the deportees could face in the country, as well as the complicated logistics of the transport. However, less than four months later, in March 2023, Interior Minister Nancy Faeser did an about-turn and declared that her office was now examining ways in which deportations to the country could take place again (Meier, 2023).

Yet what had changed the minister's mind? One possible explanation is that in the intervening months, far-right media and politicians, particularly from the AfD, waged a sustained campaign to attack the government's allegedly lax attitude towards immigrant crime, using occasions such as the New Year's Eve riots in Berlin's Neukölln district and the murder of two teenagers by a Palestinian asylum seeker with a criminal record on a train in Schleswig-Holstein to further push their narrative, calling for more deportations and stoking public outrage over the issue (Whittle, 2023, DW/n.a., 2023). This is just one example of the influence that successful right-wing *agenda setting* can have on political discourse and government policy. But how do these campaigns work and why do they work? Is there a coordinated effort between right-wing media and their political allies to turn the public against the government on these issues to put pressure on the minister to respond and change course? Who from the media and the party takes the reins in these situations and sets the agenda for the others to follow?

1.1. Study Aim and Research Question

Examining these questions and understanding the mechanisms that have led to the rise of the AfD and associated right-wing actors in politics and media is particularly worthwhile at this moment, as in the fall of 2024, the state elections in Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg are coming up and the AfD is clearly leading in the polls in all three states and may form a coalition government at state level for the first time (Deutschlandfunk/n.a., 2024; wahlrecht.de/n.a., 2024). To answer the questions posed above, this paper will analyze the dynamics between right-wing media and the AfD in a specific case to determine whether there is evidence of a coordinated effort by actors from both sides to engage in joint *agenda setting* and whether the media is taking a more active role in this. While studies have been conducted on this topic in the past, these have largely been quantitative analyses, examining, for example, what types of media AfD-affiliated accounts shared most frequently on their Facebook pages, but without using qualitative methods to specifically analyze the content of these articles and posts and the topics or narratives they propagated. Although the relationship between the media and political parties in the context of agenda building is complex and both sides have the capacity to influence each other, I assume that in the German case the media takes the more active role. The research question this paper intends to answer is therefore as follows:

How did selected right-wing alternative media outlets and social media accounts affiliated with the Berlin AfD work together to shape both the issues and narratives in Berlin's 2022-23 Berlin election campaign, and what evidence is there of coordinated *agenda setting* between the two and direct *agenda building* influence by the media?

1.2. Case Selection and Limitations

To operationalize this, I will apply the method of *process tracing* to examine articles from a selected number of right-wing alternative media outlets and social media posts from accounts affiliated with the Berlin AfD during the Berlin state election campaign 2022-23. The specific aim is to find articles and posts that show that the accounts and outlets share, interact with, and thereby reinforce each other's narratives, talking points, and policy demands, whether there is evidence of a coordinated agenda behind them and whether the media outlets take the more active role in this process.

The 2022-23 election campaign in Berlin was chosen as the object of analysis for several reasons. Firstly, the unplanned nature of the election and the less than 90 days between its announcement and election day mean that there is a manageable period of time with a clear starting and ending point, while regular election campaigns tend to run for much longer, resulting in larger amounts of data, and almost never have as clearly defined a starting point as this one. As this is a city state election, the case is also much more manageable than a larger state or even federal election would, which also significantly reduces the amount of data. However, as Berlin is the capital of the country, there is more coverage of local politics nationwide than in other, much larger federal states. Finally, the case was chosen because there were several incidents during the investigated period that raised important discussions, topics, and issues for both right-wing alternative media and the AfD, resulting in rich data for analysis. The three-month election campaign had many topics and incidents, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover everything that happened during this time or to attempt to explain the election results.

Right-wing alternative media were specifically chosen because, like the AfD, they present themselves as outside and opposed to the political mainstream and because previous research has shown that there are close personal and financial ties between the party

and some of these media, making coordination likely (Heft et al., 2019; Lemke, 2020). The decision to analyze the posts of social media accounts affiliated with the Berlin AfD to assess their agenda priorities has several reasons. Firstly, the AfD has shown to be particularly successful in using social media to reach its audience and grow its voter base, which is also true for many of the smaller, digital-only right-wing alternative media outlets that have grown in popularity in recent years and are part of this analysis. Social media is also the place where parties and media platforms most successfully reinforce each other (Haller, Holt and de La Brousse, 2019; Medina Serrano et al., 2019; Pitt and Pfeifer, 2021). Another reason is that I did not have access to other potential data sources on the agenda priorities of the Berlin AfD, such as campaign speeches, interviews, or internal communications, which limits the available options. Finally, posts on social media are very accessible and can be easily collected, which allowed me to gather a larger number of data observations than would have been otherwise the case.

The chosen approach, the selected data sources, and the scope of this thesis do pose some limitations on the explanatory power of the research results. I do not have a control group from other, more mainstream media sources or parties and politicians that would allow me to verify whether the topics and narratives disseminated by the outlets and accounts studied originate from within the right-wing ecosystem and not from other sources, such as conservative-oriented tabloids like *BILD*. I also realize that analyzing social media posts from party accounts can only approximate broader state party priorities and may skew the observed focus as these posts are targeted at a specific audience. Nevertheless, I believe that the quantity and diversity of the data will allow me to draw meaningful conclusions about the existence and nature of an agenda-setting relationship between news outlets and party studied.

2. Methodological Approach

This section will first introduce the selected methodological approach of *process tracing* to operationalize the proposed research and answer the research question. The second part will give an overview of the chosen approach to analyze the case of the 2022-23 state election campaign in Berlin and the interactions between the Berlin AfD and a selected group of right-wing alternative news sites.

2.1. Process Tracing

Process tracing is one of the most prominent and well-known methodological approaches in qualitative research in the social sciences. It is mainly used in studies of one or a small number of cases that seek to understand complex causal mechanisms within individual cases that are oftentimes either missed or cannot be fully understood by broader quantitative methods. The term *causal mechanism* is used here to describe a system of interrelated parts that transmit causal forces from causes to effects (George and Bennett, 2005). As a method, *process tracing* involves the meticulous use of evidence related to a case's context, mechanisms, and sequences to find and establish whether one can infer causal relationships between independent, dependent, and intervening variables.

In this thesis, the evidence will consist of social media postings from accounts directly associated with the AfD at the Berlin state level and articles published in a pre-selected number of right-wing alternative media outlets. The database includes posts on current events, campaign messaging, shared articles and posts, as well as clips of parliamentary speeches by AfD members shared on their social media channels. This will be supplemented with evidence taken from articles and videos published by the six news outlets that were chosen for deeper analysis, as well as other sources that help establish specific sequences of events and provide further context (Collier, 2011; Mahoney, 2010).

In their 2015 book, *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*, political science professors Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel chronicle the development of *process tracing* as a qualitative method, explaining how it was originally understood as more of a metaphorical concept that was only gradually refined over time into a precise method for within-case analyses (Bennett and Checkel, 2015). The most fundamental concept in *process tracing* that enables researchers to make causal and descriptive inferences about certain events are so-called *causal-process observations* (CPOs). CPOs are pieces of evidence that provide insight into the causal mechanisms at work within a case and are key for understanding how and why certain outcomes occur (Collier, 2011). *Process tracing* puts special emphasis on the sequence and specific timing in which events occur as well as potential auxiliary outcomes that arise from them. By looking at the precise chronological order of events and using a step-by-step analysis to assess how they relate to each other, researchers can approximate whether there exist causal pathways and mechanisms that relate one event or a series of events to each other (Mahoney, 2012).

The most common structure for operationalizing the search for inferences in *process tracing* is as a series of tests, where each piece of diagnostic evidence enhances or diminishes the plausibility of one of the hypotheses. These tests fall into distinctive categories based on the logical connections between the evidence and the hypothesis, the conclusions that can be drawn, and their implications for alternate explanations (George and Bennett, 2005; Mahoney, 2012; Collier, 2011; Bennett and Checkel, 2015).

From weakest to strongest, the four tests most used in *process tracing*, which will be applied here, are the *Straw-in the-Wind* (SITWT), *Hoop*, *Smoking-Gun* (SGT), and *Doubly-Decisive Tests* (DDT), each of which looks at different aspects, allows researchers to draw different levels of inference and serves a different purpose (George and Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011; Mahoney, 2012; Bennett and Checkel, 2015). In terms of the

evidence it provides, the *SITWT* is the weakest, only providing preliminary indications that can slightly increase or decrease the plausibility of a hypothesis but does not allow one to draw explicit conclusions from it. A piece of diagnostic evidence that supports the hypothesis in a *SITWT* slightly enhances its plausibility, while its absence does not significantly undermine it. If a *SITWT* is passed, it slightly weakens rival hypotheses, whereas failing the test strengthens them. The *Hoop Test* is named thusly, because passing it is a prerequisite for a hypothesis to be considered further, as it needs to jump through the metaphorical hoop to not be discarded. However, passing a *Hoop Test* is not sufficient to fully confirm a hypothesis. Rival hypotheses are somewhat weakened if a *Hoop Test* is passed and strengthened if it fails. *SGTs* provide sufficient but not necessary evidence for a hypothesis. Passing the test strongly supports a hypothesis, whereas failing it does weaken but not fully disprove it. The sufficient condition for a hypothesis to pass an *SGT* is that the presented evidence is strong enough to confirm the hypothesis. Passing an *SGT* substantially weakens rival explanations, while failing it makes a hypothesis less convincing without eliminating it. *DDTs* are the strongest and most rigid tests. Passing a *DDT* provides both necessary and sufficient evidence to confirm a hypothesis while eliminating all other existing alternatives. While there is rarely enough evidence for a hypothesis to fully pass a *DDT*, they offer the highest inferential leverage out of the four tests (George and Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011; Mahoney, 2012; Bennett and Checkel, 2015). The four tests and what passing and failing them says about a hypothesis are below.

Figure 1: Process Tracing Tests

		SUFFICIENT FOR AFFIRMING CAUSAL INFERENCE	
		No	Yes
		1. Straw-in-the-Wind	3. Smoking-Gun
NECESSARY FOR AFFIRMING CAUSAL INFERENCE	No	a. Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis, but does not confirm it.	a. Passing: Confirms hypothesis.
		b. Failing: Hypothesis is not eliminated, but is slightly weakened.	b. Failing: Hypothesis is not eliminated, but is somewhat weakened.
		c. Implications for rival hypotheses: Passing <i>slightly</i> weakens them. Failing <i>slightly</i> strengthens them.	c. Implications for rival hypotheses: Passing <i>substantially</i> weakens them. Failing <i>somewhat</i> strengthens them.
	Yes	2. Hoop	4. Doubly Decisive
		a. Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis, but does not confirm it.	a. Passing: Confirms hypothesis and eliminates others.
		b. Failing: Eliminates hypothesis.	b. Failing: Eliminates hypothesis.
		c. Implications for rival hypotheses: Passing <i>somewhat</i> weakens them. Failing <i>somewhat</i> strengthens them.	c. Implications for rival hypotheses: Passing <i>eliminates</i> them. Failing <i>substantially</i> strengthens them.

Source: Collier (2011)

Figure 1: Process Tracing Tests

In practice, research that utilizes *process tracing* involves several steps. Firstly, an underlying research question about causal processes within a specific case needs to be formulated. In a second step, the causal mechanism that is being looked for needs to be defined (George and Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011). Next, one or a small number of cases is selected. These can either be typical or deviate from the norm, either way providing ample data for analysis. The following step of data collection involves gathering detailed and context-specific evidence from a variety of sources, such as documents, public proclamations, archival records, or observations. The penultimate step involves the creation of a chronological narrative by the researcher that details the sequence of events and processes that lead to the outcome of interest. In the last step, the hypotheses about the previously formulated causal mechanisms are tested against the collected evidence, utilizing the four tests described above (Mahoney, 2010; Bennett and Checkel, 2015).

When using *process tracing*, there are a few things that researchers need to keep in mind to successfully complete their inquiry. Firstly, it is crucial to select suitable cases that have clearly observable causal mechanisms and for which sufficient data is available (George and Bennett, 2005; Collier, 2011). Another important consideration is the quality of the data, as reliable and diverse sources of evidence are needed for the researcher to build a solid narrative and conduct rigorous testing. Researchers also need to be aware of their own potential biases in both data collection and interpretation. The mechanisms to be tested also need to be clearly defined and appropriately limited, as they should be neither too vague nor too broad. Finally, it is helpful to use multiple sources and types of evidence to cross-check the results and strengthen the causal inferences drawn from them (Bennett and Checkel, 2015; Mahoney, 2012).

2.2. Chosen Approach

In order to operationalize the research question, the focus of the thesis is on the analysis of articles and posts collected from the studied media outlets and selected social media accounts from November 16, 2022, the day the election rerun was announced, until the day of the election on February 12, 2023. As it would have gone beyond the scope of this paper to include all articles and posts published during the election campaign, I searched for Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram accounts affiliated with the Berlin AfD and scanned them for frequently raised issues, topics, and narratives, adding promising posts to my database and forming thematic categories from them. A list of the accounts can be found in Appendix C, B-D. The categories were created either to capture all articles and posts that dealt with a similar general topic, such as migration and asylum, *culture war*, and general news from or about Berlin, or because they dealt with a specific event, such as the murders in Illerkirchberg and Brokstedt or the New Year's Eve

riots in Berlin (Appendix C, 1.1-5). I then did the same for the selected right-wing alternative media outlets, carefully reviewing each of their archives for the relevant time period and selecting articles that fit one of the previously established categories or were otherwise relevant. The rationale for selecting the analyzed media outlets from the broader right-wing alternative media sphere can be found in Chapter 4.1 and more information about them in Appendix C, A. In total, I gathered and coded 1,367 articles from seven outlets and 911 social media posts from 24 different accounts, yielding a total of 2,278 data observations (Appendix C, 0. Analyses and Charts).

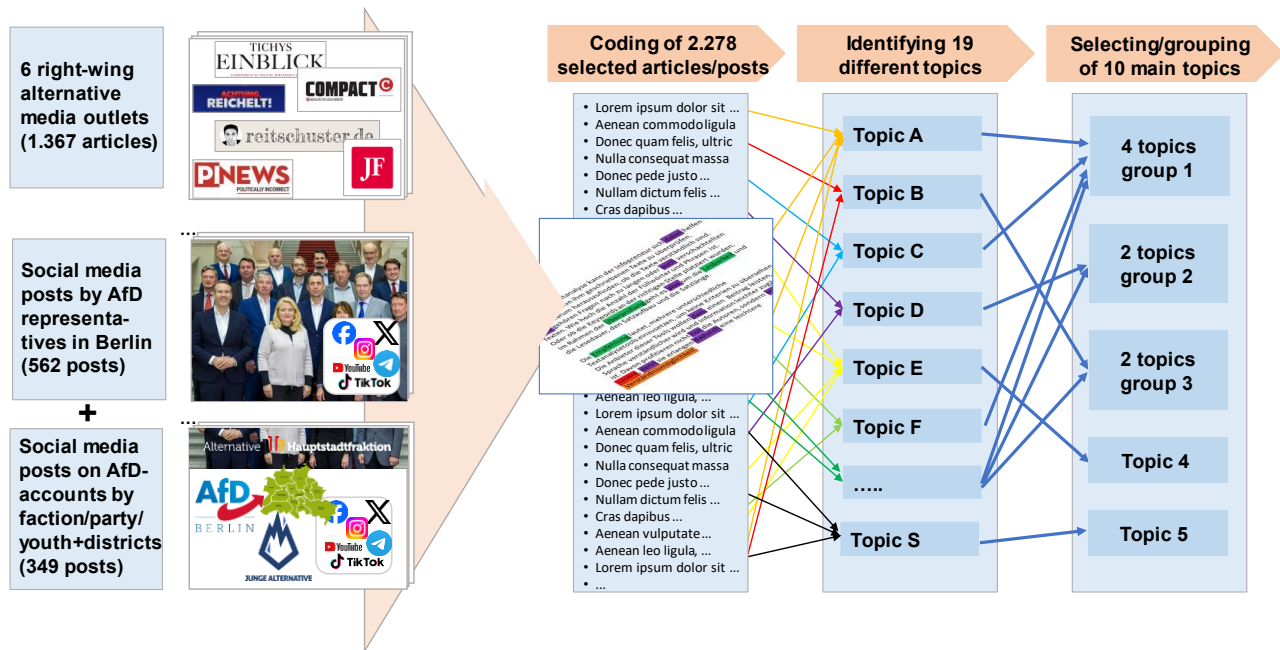
To reduce the amount of data down to a manageable level, I then selected ten main topics to focus on in the analysis. These were selected both for their volume and their potential to provide interesting results in the analysis. This left 1,644 data observations, of which 909 were articles and 735 were social media posts. I then coded the articles and posts in the five selected categories into further sub-categories to find and establish thematic and narrative connections between the data observations that were previously collected under the same larger theme (Appendix C, 1.1-5). Using these categories and sub-categories, I then compared those articles and posts from which causal mechanisms and pathways could be inferred that supported one of the two main and four sub-hypotheses. This step was then followed by the concrete analysis in which I described the observations and evidence I was able to draw from the data and then analyzed whether these observations allowed my hypotheses to pass any of the four main tests of *process tracing* presented in the previous chapter and to draw inferences about whether the media outlets and social media accounts studied were involved in *first and second level agenda setting* and whether the media had an influence on the party's agenda and vice versa. The final step was then to determine what conclusions the tests allowed me to draw about the accuracy

of my hypotheses. The process of searching the outlets and posts, coding them into different topical categories and then selecting those topics that were analyzed is below.

Figure 2: Chosen Approach – Influence of RW Alt-Media on the AfD

Berlin State Election 2022-23 Campaign, 16.11.2022 - 12.02.2023

CONCEPTUAL



Source: Own representation

Figure 2: Chosen Approach - Influence of RW Alt-Media on the AfD

3. Literature Review

The next sections will give an overview of the most relevant concepts, which are alternative media and right-wing alternative media ecosystems as well as *political agenda setting/building* and the role of the media.

3.1. Alternative Media and Media Ecosystems

Alternative media, depending on the context the term is used in, can refer to *non-mainstream media* forms like graffiti, street theatres, or fanzines. However, it can also be used as a marketing category to differentiate certain cultural products, like movies or music that are too challenging or non-conformist for mainstream audiences (Danesi, 2015). In addition to this reading of the term *alternative* as referring to the physical properties of the media, the term can also refer to its content and how the publishing outlet situates itself within society at large. Historically, what united all alternative forms of media was a general opposition to what people saw as the *mainstream media* and to give a voice to viewpoints that were either marginalized or received very little attention in public discourse. In the past, producers of alternative media saw it as their mission to give a voice to minorities and marginalized groups and to challenge the *cultural hegemony* of the political and economic elites that dominated the established media.

As a result, most alternative outlets were usually found on the left and scholarly research on the subject largely focused on *left-wing alternative media* as instruments of opposition to the ruling classes (Haller, Holt and de La Brosse, 2019). Until the emergence of the Internet as the main platform for news media, this historical view of alternative media as left-wing was deeply rooted in the way it was talked about and conceptualized, both in academic and public discourse. Exemplary for this is the fact that terms like *mainstream media* were first coined and popularized by leftist scholars like the linguist

Noam Chomsky. Moreover, the idea behind the need for alternative news sources as representatives of a popular opposition to the positions of the ruling classes is closely linked to the leftist concept of *cultural hegemony* (Holt, 2022).

Most famously defined by the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci, *cultural hegemony* refers to the domination of a culturally diverse society by the ruling class, who seek to manipulate the culture, beliefs, perceptions, and values of a society in such a way that their imposed ruling-class worldview becomes the accepted cultural norm (Gramsci, 1971; Lears, 1985; Litowitz, 2000). According to Gramsci, the mechanism the ruling class uses to control the population and establish *cultural hegemony* is not achieved through force, but rather through the consensual and voluntary acceptance of the dominant culture by the subordinate classes (Crehan, 2002; Gramsci, 1971). The media plays a crucial role in this through a process scholars have called *consent manufacturing*, where the media seeks to shape public perceptions and reinforce a dominant ideology by controlling the flow of information and framing the discourse through selective reporting and normalization (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Lears, 1985; Litowitz, 2000). In this sense, alternative media was understood as a counterweight, combatting the ruling classes narrative and seeking to destabilize the reigning capitalist order.

More modern conceptions of what makes media alternative have deviated from these underlying assumptions to more broadly capture the entire landscape of alternative media that exists both on the political Left and Right. Here, the defining characteristic is not whether a news outlet speaks in opposition to societal hegemony and for a marginalized community, but whether they perceive themselves as being opposed to the ruling class and traditional *mainstream media*. As a result, it does not necessarily matter whether the agenda that alternative media outlets are trying to promote is underrepresented, but whether they and their audience believe that to be the case (Holt, 2022).

In his book *Right-Wing Alternative Media*, Kristoffer Holt makes this important distinction and introduces two different types of *anti-system-ness* as either being ideologically motivated or relational to the existing power structures. The use of this theoretical framework is more flexible than the more explicitly leftist approaches of the past and is applicable to all types of alternative media (Holt, 2022). In recent years, the broad availability of the Internet and the emergence of social media have significantly lowered the amount of expertise, funding, and connections needed for establishing a news outlet, which has led to the emergence of many alternative news sites across the globe.

Technical innovation, however, is not the only reason as to why we are seeing so many of these sites rise to prominence. Another important driver of this recent upsurge is a general dissatisfaction with *mainstream media* outlets. Parallel to these developments, many countries have also seen the rise of political actors that are combining populist talking points and tactics with a right-wing ideology. Recent studies suggest that there often exists a correlation between a person's support for a populist agenda and a low level of trust in the media, suggesting that wherever right-wing politics are popular, there exists a potentially large audience for alternative media (Müller and Schulz, 2019).

Another term that will be used in this thesis is that of the *media ecosystem*. The *Media Manipulation Casebook*, a digital research platform for mapping media manipulation and disinformation campaigns, defines media ecosystems as “complex combinations of print, broadcast, digital and social media that work together to create a self-referential information environment” (The Media Manipulation Casebook/n.A., n.d.). Originally coined by researchers in the field of ecology the term *ecosystem* described the concept of an entirety of a system, not just the organism-complex, but also all the physical factors that form the surroundings of the biome, with which they form one physical system (Tans-

ley, 1935). This was taken up in the 1960s by NYU professor Neil Postman who pioneered the field of *Media Ecology*. He studied how media affects human understanding, perception, and values and found that the way we interact with media is crucial for our survival as a species. Applying Tansley and Postman's concept to the present day, Ethan Zuckerman argues, that "it is not just the ways individuals have received propaganda and misinformation (...) that should give us concern (...) it is the complex interactions between digital media, conventional media, politicians, voters, advertisers and platforms that we need to investigate to understand the contemporary moment" (Zuckerman, 2021). Understood in this manner, insulated right-wing media ecosystems can be extremely dangerous. On the one hand, media ecosystems can be used for the development and dissemination of far-right ideas. They can also facilitate the radicalization of users who already sympathize with far-right positions, and they provide a relatively unregulated and open space that allows activists to organize themselves and build communities around their radical right-wing ideology (Guhl, Ebner and Rau, 2020: 44).

3.2. The Rise of Right-Wing Alternative Media

News media outlets have long been known to hold great influence on public discourse, putting topics on the population's radar, altering the way in which debates are waged and affecting the behavior, thought processes, and priorities of actors like citizens, companies, civil society organizations, and political parties of all kinds (Owen, 2014). However, with the rise of the Internet and especially social media, there has been a shift in the way people consume, interact with, and select the news that they consume as well as what they are expecting from their news. A significant trend that goes hand in hand with these larger developments is the decline in people's trust in the reporting of established, well-known, and formerly reputable national news organizations (Newman et al., 2023).

A survey conducted by *Cision* as part of their *State of the Media Report* in 2023 found that 66.8 percent of respondents in Germany stated that the public trust in the media had decreased over the preceding year, compared to 65.9 percent in 2022. Furthermore, only 2.43 percent of respondents believed that public trust in media had increased (Harms, 2024). For the same period, the *Mainzer Langzeitstudie Medienvertrauen 2023* (Mainz-based long-term study on media trust) found that 44 percent of respondents stated that they trust the media somewhat or completely and 25 percent, that they trust them somewhat or not at all (Quiring et al., 2024). One of the main objects of media criticism in recent times has been *public service media* (PSM), which, according to a 2023 study by the *Reuters Institute for The Study of Journalism* at the University of Oxford, is regularly attacked “from politicians, activists, and alternative media on the Right”.

Individuals who self-identify on the political Right are also generally less likely to consider PSM as important when compared to those on the left. This discrepancy also provides an opportunity for critics to argue that these media organizations are aligned with a *liberal elite* and serve a nefarious agenda (Newman et al., 2023). This trend corresponds with international findings such as in the US, where a *Pew Research Center* conducted study showed that particularly self-identified Republicans trust legacy media institutions less than Democrats and more often procure their news from smaller, often digital, alternative media outlets whose reporting is more heavily skewed towards their existing political positions (Gottfried, Walker and Mitchell, 2020a). Yet, it is not only Republicans who are losing faith in established media as over half of all respondents did not have “too much” or “no confidence at all” that journalists served the public interest (Gottfried, Walker and Mitchell, 2020b).

The deterioration of public trust in legacy media institutions and the rise of social media have particularly helped smaller, less established and politically biased alternative

media outlets. Their rise in popularity has allowed these organizations, who often only have a small staff and budget, to quickly gain a level of relevance in the public discourse, that is in no way correlated to their size, the relevance of their beliefs or political acumen. While such developments can be observed on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, conservative and right-leaning websites such as *Breitbart News* in the US or the weekly newspaper *JUNGE FREIHEIT* in Germany have generally been much more successful at this game than their former opponents on the political left (Haller, Holt and de La Brosse, 2019: 4f). Some of the tactics these sites deploy to boost their traffic numbers include clickbait stories and promoting a clear political agenda that often omits facts, peddles disinformation, presents stories without the necessary context or is explicitly aimed at inducing outrage in its readers (Parks, 2021).

What accompanies the increasing popularity and mainstream presence of both far-right populist parties and alternative media is a normalization of their extremist positions and narratives. Across Europe, right-wing have been on the rise and their presence in the political mainstream has significantly shifted the way other parties and the public treat them. The mainstreaming and popularization not only of extremist parties and alternative media sites, but also of their positions and narratives, thus poses a genuine threat, not only to democratic values, but above all to the people and groups affected by this rhetoric (Jones, 2023). To combat these developments and populist narratives, one must first understand where their popularity comes from and what their strategy is. Understanding whether and how right-wing populist parties and alternative media work together to promote a common ideology and bring it into the political mainstream can be an important tool to counter the normalization of the far right and its positions.

3.3. Political Agenda Setting and the Policy-Making Process

The last theoretical concepts that need to be introduced are that of *agenda setting* and *agenda building* and the media's particular role. In their seminal paper "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media", Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw define *political agenda setting* as referring to the process by which certain issues are prioritized over others and given prominence by powerful actors in politics, the media, and public (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The basic idea behind this is the observation that the media can influence which topics are perceived as important by the public by simply giving some more attention than others. Agenda-setting theory proposed by McCombs and Shaw states that the media do not tell us exactly what we should think, but rather what issues we should think about. This then leads to the observation that news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of our common political reality. The authors therefore postulate that the "mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues" (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Agenda setting theory asserts that the media influences what issues people think and talk about by emphasizing certain issues over others, as the importance given to an issue, influences both the public's agenda and that of political and government actors. Since the media holds a great deal of influence over which topics are placed on the agenda, they are key to determining which issues are reported on and the relative order of their importance (Danesi, 2015). McCombs' and Shaw's foundational concept was expanded upon by authors like Salma Ghanem, who suggest that the media cannot just influence the perceived importance of a specific topic but also how people think about it.

To illustrate this, they coined the term *second level agenda setting* as an addition to the simpler *first level* described by McCombs and Shaw. Ghanem and others found that

the media influence not only what general issues people think about, but also their specific views on them, framing issues in particular ways, overemphasizing certain characteristics and interpretations over others, and even omitting certain viewpoints or arguments altogether (Ghanem, 1997; McCombs et al., 1997; Entman, 1993). By applying a particular framing to a story, media coverage can shift public opinion and create pressure on policymakers to address issues in a certain way. If done successfully, *second level agenda setting* can thus completely reorient political priorities and lead to the allocation of resources and attention to issues that had been neglected or thought about differently (Kingdon, 1984; Cobb and Elder, 1971; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993).

Two mechanisms that help the media set the agenda are *framing* and *priming*. *Framing* describes the process by which certain facts, themes, or treatments are selected and emphasized, which shapes not just the audience's perception of the individual issue, but their understanding of the larger social reality around them and the way they respond to it (Entman, 1993). *Priming* on the other hand refers to the process by which the media prepares the public to have a particular view of an event or issue by highlighting certain details, which influences the criteria by which related issues or public figures are evaluated. Successful priming affects the public's view of an event, issue, or person. It enhances the salience of certain issues in the public's mind, making them more accessible than others. It also influences the standards and criteria by which people judge political candidates and issues, and it has a temporal effect, emphasizing certain aspects of issues before the audience has had the time to form an opinion or decide (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). In *agenda setting* theory, both *framing* and *priming* are mechanisms that help explain how the media influence which issues are considered important and how they are perceived and evaluated by the public. The framing of an issue is largely relevant to *sec-*

ond level agenda setting studies, while priming is useful for understanding the psychological processes that underlie agenda setting (Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

Research into *first* and *second level political agenda setting* by the media investigates the impact that news media coverage has on political priorities and the ways in which media factors into how the political agenda is established (Langer and Gruber, 2021). The process of turning a topic that is being talked about in the media into a political priority is also referred to as *agenda building*. *Agenda building* generally means the collaborative process through which different actors contribute to the formation of a political agenda. Similarly to *agenda setting*, building an issue up until it ends up on the government's agenda involves multiple levels, from identifying issues to promoting them and finally formulating fitting policy responses (Cobb and Elder, 1971; Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). The first step of *issue identification* involves recognizing and articulating a problem that had previously been ignored and accordingly requires government intervention to be addressed. In a second step, this issue is then promoted widely through the usage of media and other channels so that it ends up on people's radars and is perceived as being of critical and timely importance. Using the previously established terminology, these two steps together constitute what can be referred to as *first level agenda building*. The final step in the process then involves the development of potential policy solutions to address the identified issues and convincing both the public and political decision makers that it is the right approach, which in accordance with *agenda setting* theory constitutes *second level agenda building*.

The main actors that regularly engage in *agenda building* are interest groups and political parties, who use lobbying tactics, public campaigns. and media engagement to advocate for their issues (Cobb and Elder, 1971; Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner and Jones,

1993). Another actor that engages in such practices is, of course, the media itself, which plays a crucial role in highlighting issues and framing the discourse that in turn shapes public perceptions and influences policy agendas (Soroka, 2003; Entman, 2007). The way the media frames an issue is usually by selecting specific aspects of a perceived reality and making them appear more salient, thereby promoting a certain way of looking at and defining a problem, interpreting the causal inferences that contributed to the problem's emergence, evaluate it on a moral level, and recommend a certain treatment for it (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). Particularly powerful and important media outlets and personalities also practice so-called *intermedia agenda setting*, by which important media outlets influence the agenda of other media actors, creating a cascade effect and raising their issue or framing's salience amongst not just political actors and the public, but also their own cohort (Golan, 2006; McCombs, 2004).

If an issue or framing succeeds in getting onto the political agenda, it can lead to policy changes, shift public opinion and realign or overturn existing political priorities (Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Actors within the political system that often seek to employ *agenda building* to raise their profile or promote their issues are those political parties that are not part of the governing coalition but instead find themselves in the opposition (Müller and Strøm, 1999). As they themselves usually cannot successfully build majorities for policy proposals to be passed by parliament, opposition parties must seek to influence the government's policy agenda by trying to shine a light on issues they believe are not being addressed or being addressed wrongly and mobilizing public opinion to exert pressure on the government to act a certain way (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg, 2013). These parties, particularly on the political Right, often use alternative media to bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media and promote narratives that are antithetical or too extreme to the political mainstream (Holt, 2022). In

Europe, right-wing parties have successfully employed such tactics to influence government policy on issues such as immigration or *euroscepticism*, first building up the importance and their approach of these issues in the public arena and then gradually moving the government's policies in their preferred direction (Akkerman, 2012; Mudde, 2007).

4. Investigated Case

The following chapter will introduce the case that will be the subject of analysis. The first part will look at the right-wing alternative media eco-sphere in Germany, which will be followed by a section on the AfD and its Berlin branch and an overview of the 2022-23 Berlin state election. Afterwards the hypotheses for the analysis will be introduced.

4.1. The Right-Wing Alternative Media Ecosystem in Germany

Much like in other countries, the rise of right-wing alternative media in Germany began in the early 2000s. Driven by a popular dissatisfaction with *mainstream media* that was perceived as being biased or too far left, as well as the exploding growth of the Internet and social media, there was fertile ground for these outlets to flourish (Holt, 2022; Heft et al., 2019). Since its emergence, this ecosystem has expanded rapidly, particularly after the 2015 refugee crisis, which not only contributed to the creation of popular right-wing political protest movements like the *Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West* (PEGIDA) or the rise of the AfD, but also provided an opportunity for old and new right-wing outlets to capitalize on anti-immigrant sentiment in the population (Haller, Holt and de la Brosse, 2019; Berntzen and Weisskircher, 2016). Over the ensuing decade, these platforms have become even more sophisticated and professional, attracting ever larger audiences by smartly capitalizing on other major crises like the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Holt, 2022; Funke, 2016).

It is important for their growth, that right-wing alternative media outlets in Germany draw financial support from several different sources. Most of them finance their daily operating costs through membership fees, subscription models, and private donations, both as small amounts from many different ordinary readers as well as more significant amounts from wealthy individuals aligned with their cause (Heft, Ramsland and

Mayerhöffer, 2024, Holt, 2022). Like other types of digital media, some also rely on advertising revenue, mostly from niche advertisers that view alternative news readers as a potential or existing customer base, such as right-wing publishing houses. Right-wing think tanks and organizations have also been known to provide financial and other support to these media outlets, usually in the form of direct funding, grants or by providing them with larger platforms to disseminate their content (Haller, Holt and de la Brosse, 2019). Some German right-wing alternative media also have affiliations with international right-wing networks, which in some cases provide financial support as well as ideological inspiration. Interacting with and building connections with like-minded organizations in other parts of the world enables these outlets to share content, strategies, and resources across borders, which enhances their influence and makes them more sustainable (Wong and Trilling, 2023; Guhl, Ebner and Rau, 2020).

Many of these media have a close and sometimes almost symbiotic relationship with the AfD and often serve as unofficial mouthpieces for the party, promoting its narratives and policy positions. In turn, AfD politicians and even official party organs endorse and legitimize these sites by sharing their content and citing them in political discourse (Heft et al., 2019; Lemke, 2020). Especially during election campaigns, the AfD frequently picks up on stories and themes propagated by these outlets, creating a feedback loop where the media shapes a critical part of the public's opinion on certain issues and the AfD capitalizes on these sentiments to grow its voter base and bolster its political agenda (Havertz, 2021; Berntzen and Weisskircher, 2016).

Like alternative media outlets in other countries, the focus of these media's messages in Germany is on anti-elitist and populist rhetoric that portrays *mainstream* political parties, traditional media, and established institutions as corrupt and out of touch with the

wishes and needs of ordinary citizens. This aligns with the party's broader political strategy, which seeks to position itself as a defender of the *common people* against a corrupt political establishment that is not interested in them (Funke, 2016; Gäbler, 2018). The main avenue through which the AfD and these media outlets promote and amplify each other is through social media. The party has successfully leveraged platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram to bypass traditional media and communicate with its supporters directly. The party's recipe for success largely involves creating emotionally charged and provocative content that is simple and highly shareable, thus ensuring a maximum amount of reach and engagement. Facebook remains the most significant platform for the AfD, where a substantial portion of their user interactions occur (Medina Serrano et al., 2019, Pitt and Pfeifer, 2021). A 2021 analysis by the British civil society organization *HOPE not Hate* found that the AfD and social media accounts affiliated with the party played an extremely significant role in amplifying the reach of right-wing alternative media outlets. According to the study, 12 of the *20 Most effective sharers of alternative media sites* on Facebook are politicians that either represented them in parliament or were active for them in a functionary role at the time. Two of the other eight most effective sharers were the party's main account, as well as that of the Bavarian state AfD (Right Response Team/n.a., 2021).

For their study, *HOPE not Hate* scraped a total of 68,657 articles published in alternative media outlets from 1 January to 31 July 2021 and found that the right-wing alternative media sphere in Germany is largely made up of a closely-knit network of sites who often have a specific niche they cover and also regularly link and refer to each other's content, both because they do not publish enough on their own and because they want to help and promote each other (Right Response Team/n.a., 2021; Mayerhöffer and Heft, 2022). The spectrum of sites that are a part of this network ranges from still respectable,

seemingly right-wing conservative sites to those that focus on spreading conspiracy theories and those that are openly far right (Katapult/n.a., 2024). The alternative outlets that were chosen for this analysis are *Tichys Einblick*, *Achtung, Reichelt!*, *reitschuster.de*, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, *PI-News*, and *COMPACT Magazin*. A representation of the larger right-wing alternative media sphere and their connections with each other, as well as a broad ideological classification of the investigated outlets are below.

Figure 3.: German RW Alt-Media – Overview and Selection

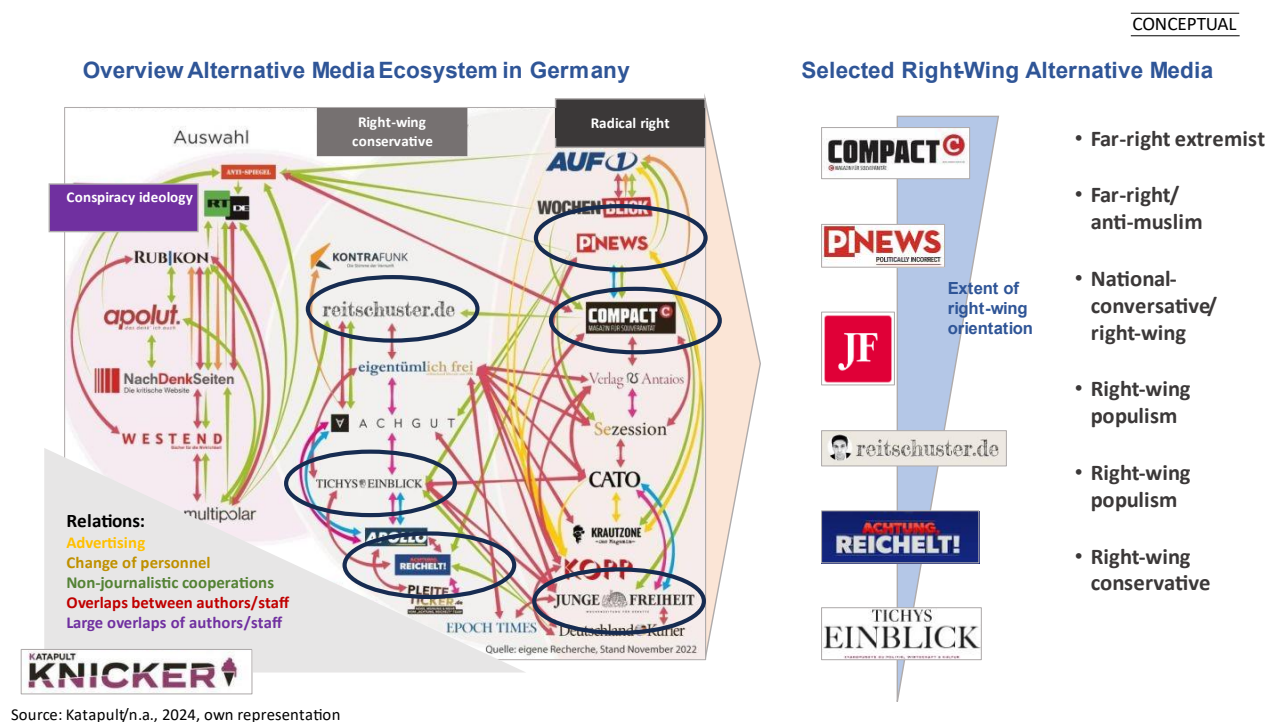


Figure 3: German RW Alt-Media - Overview and Selection

Tichys Einblick (also referred to as A.01) is a right-wing conservative online outlet and one of the most read alternative sites in the country. The site was founded in 2014 by the journalist Roland Tichy and focuses on economic issues, migration, and, as they view it, the excesses of gender-sensitive language and woke ideology (Belltower News/n.a, n.d.a). It was the most shared site in the *HOPE not Hate* study with 827,871 shares and ranked second among shares from AfD-affiliated pages with 608 (Right Response

Team/n.a., 2021). Out of the selected outlets, it is generally regarded as the most respected in the mainstream and has been described as a part of “the intellectual part of the right-conservative (online) media in Germany”, giving respectability and reach to ideas and narratives that can be found in other more overtly right-wing publications (Bachl, 2018).

Achtung, Reichelt! (A.02) was originally founded in 2022 as a YouTube channel by the well-known journalist Julian Reichelt after he was fired as editor-in-chief (EIC) of Germany’s most widely read tabloid newspaper *BILD*. Today, it is one of the formats published by *Nius*, a news site Reichelt founded in the summer of 2023 with funding from right-wing donor Frank Gotthardt (Kirlidokme, 2023). On his channel, Reichelt comments on current events and daily news, often using click-bait and sensationalist language to attack migrants, woke ideology, or German energy policy. As of July 21, 2024, the channel, which describes itself as “the toughest opponent of hypocrisy, propaganda and duplicity in politics!” has 485,000 subscribers (Achtung, Reichelt, n.d.).

Reitschuster.de (A.03), named after its founder Boris Reitschuster, a well-known German journalist who from 1999 until 2015 worked as a correspondent for the conservative weekly magazine *FOCUS*, was started as a personal blog in 2015. The site rose to prominence as one of the outlets most opposed to public safety measures and vaccination campaigns during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, publishing misinformation and scaremongering about the disease’s origin, vaccination and mask mandates, and the need for lockdowns (VoxCheck/n.a., 2022). Reitschuster’s blog was shared a total of 607,048 times on Facebook, putting him second among all alternative media sites in the sample. His articles were also shared a total of 170 times by pages associated with the AfD, putting him third there (Right Response Team/n.a., 2021). According to the online-traffic meas-

uring site *Similarweb*, his page registered a total of 2,800,000 visitors in June 2024, showing that it remains extremely popular despite COVID-19 no longer being as much of a focus in public and political discourse as it was before (Similarweb/n.a., 2024a).

JUNGE FREIHEIT (A.04) is a weekly newspaper and online magazine founded in 1986 by journalist Dieter Stein who still leads the paper as its managing director. With a circulation of 29,978 copies and millions of monthly readers on the Internet, researchers have in the past described the publication as the mouthpiece of the country's New Right and ideologically located it on the border between conservatism and right-wing extremism (Belltower News/n.a., n.d. b). In the *HOPE not Hate study*, the site ranked third among alternative outlets in overall Facebook shares with 511,853 and first among accounts associated with the AfD with 859 (Right Response Team/n.a., 2021). Alongside *Tichys Einblick*, it is generally seen as the most mainstream and respectable of the outlets in Germany's right-wing alternative media ecosystem. Out of all the investigated sites, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* has the closest personal ties to the AfD. Roland Gläser, member and media spokesperson of the AfD group in Berlin's chamber of deputies, is a former editor of *JUNGE FREIHEIT* and one of the paper's founders, Martin Schmidt, was an MP for the party in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate from 2014 to 2024 (Alternative Hauptstadtfraktion/n.a., n.d.; Kohrs, 2016).

PI-News (Politically Incorrect News, A.05), founded in 2004 by blogger Stefan Herre, in the past described as "the most influential anti-Muslim blog in Germany", has connections to the extreme right *Identitarian Movement*, publishes texts from well-known anti-Islam agitators like Michael Stürzenberger, frequently warns its readers of an imminent *Great Replacement* and the ongoing Islamization of Europe and sits "at the center of an expanding network of organizations and individuals in Germany and Europe that agitate against Islam and Muslims" (Bridge Initiative/n.a., 2019; Right Response

Team/n.a., 2021, Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Innern/n.a., 2023). Since 2021, the site has also been under observation by the *Verfassungsschutz* (Office for the Protection of the Constitution) who regard it as proven extremist (Wiedmann-Schmidt, 2021). While the site's readership is not as large (two million monthly visits in June), it still ranked fourth among alternative media sites shared by AfD associated pages in the *HOPE not Hate* sample with 104 shares (*HOPE not Hate* /n.a., 2021; Similarweb/n.a., 2024b).

The last investigated site, *COMPACT Magazin* (A.06), is a web outlet that also publishes a monthly magazine with a circulation of 40,000 copies that was founded in 2010 by Jürgen Elsässer, a well-known figure among the country's *New Right*. According to the Bavarian *Verfassungsschutz*'s 2023 report on right-wing extremism, the site and magazine not only disseminate conspiratorial content, but also regularly spread Islamophobic and xenophobic content that is, among other things, directed against the guarantee of human dignity in the *Grundgesetz* (German Constitution) (Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Innern/n.a., 2024). After having been under observation by the *Verfassungsschutz* for several years, Germany's Ministry of the Interior Nancy Faeser officially banned *COMPACT* from publishing on July 16, 2024, searching its offices, seizing its assets, and taking its sites as well as social media accounts off the Internet (Bundesministerium des Innern/n.a., 2024). While the site does not rank as high in terms of total readership and social media interactions, their existence as a magazine and publishing house as well as the prominence of its founder and EIC make it extremely relevant within the country's right-wing alternative media ecosystem (Murray and Stein, 2024).

These six outlets form the core of the media side of the analysis and are supplemented by stories from the *BILD*-owned daily boulevard paper *BZ-Berlin* (A.07), from which reports on more local events in Berlin are drawn, as well as other outlets that were either linked to by AfD-affiliated accounts or serve to establish the timelines of some of

the events that are being analyzed. Although the right-wing alternative media ecosystem in Germany is of course much larger, these media outlets were chosen for their reach and relationship to the party to cover as much of the ideological spectrum as possible.

4.2. The Berlin AfD as an Example of a Right-Wing Populist Party

In this thesis, the AfD will be classified as a right-wing populist party. However, there is no clear academic definition for populism as a political concept, because populism does not have a clearly agreed-upon scholarly definition. Instead, it has been one of the most misused concepts in public and academic political discourse in recent years, so there are ongoing controversial debates about what constitutes a populist party, and which parties generally fall under this term (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). The definition used here comes from Argentinian political scientist Ernesto Laclau, who sees populism as a discursive strategy or *mode of articulation* that serves to divide society into different blocs along one general political boundary. This boundary positions the majority of the people, the so-called *underdogs*, on one side and the wealthy elites and those in power on the other. Populism is therefore not linked to a specific political ideology but can function in different contexts or institutional frameworks. To some extent, this makes almost any political action populist, and the analysis is therefore less about whether a party's actions are populist, and more about how populist they are (Laclau, 2005: 34ff).

In the German political science literature, the AfD is almost universally classified as a right-wing populist party, as it exhibits almost all the classic characteristics of populism and explicitly represents the nativist and chauvinistic positions generally associated with modern right-wing parties in the global West (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Decker, 2017). From its founding in 2013 as a party explicitly in opposition to the political mainstream, to its positioning as the true voice of the silent majority of people who are tired

of the existing political establishment and elites, the party's rhetoric is laden with all the classic characteristics of populism (Arzheimer, 2018; Funke, 2016).

What makes the AfD's brand of populism right-wing is that its idea of what constitutes *the people* is ethnoculturally reductionist and explicitly excludes marginalized minorities such as migrants or Muslims and even presents them as the cause for societal problems of all kinds. Although the party's populist logic leaves partial openings for the inclusion of certain minorities, such as LGBTQIA* people like party leader Alice Weidel or the so-called *Russian Germans*, the party's populism is firmly on the right (Lees, 2018; Kim, 2017). In a 2021 study authored by Hendrik Cremer, the *Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte* (German Institute for Human Rights) concludes that racist and far-right positions are an integral part of the party's program and strategy, as well as the positioning of its leaders and elected officials (Cremer, 2021).

In 2022, the Cologne Administrative Court classified the entire party as a so-called *Rechtsextremistischer Verdachtsfall* (suspected case of right-wing extremism), allowing the *Verfassungsschutz* to monitor both the party and its youth organization *Junge Alternative für Deutschland* (Young Alternative for Germany, JA) as potentially extremist movements. This judgement was upheld after appeal from the party by the *Higher Administrative Court of North-Rhine Westphalia* in May of 2024 (Oberverwaltungsgericht für das Land Nordrhein-Westfalen/n.a., 2024). Branches of the party at state level are also under observation by the *Verfassungsschutz*, including those in Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, and Hesse as *Suspected Cases* and those in Thuringia, Saxony, and Saxony-Anhalt as *Gesichert Rechtsextremistisch* (Confirmed Right-Wing Extremist) (Vogel and Kehlbach, 2024; ZDF/n.a., 2023; Schäfer, 2024). The *Flügel* (Wing), a movement within the party, was declared to be *Gesichert Rechtsextremistisch* in March of 2020. While it was officially dissolved by its leaders Björn Höcke and Andreas Kalbitz later that year,

none of its members were expelled and most of its members continued their political mission (SPIEGEL Online/n.a., 2020).

Due to a state law in Berlin that does not allow the city's *Verfassungsschutz* to disclose if they are surveilling a political party as a *Suspected Case*, it is not officially known whether the AfD is being monitored at the state level there (Legal Tribune Online/n.a., 2024). Citing to anonymous sources within the state security apparatus, however, several news outlets did report that the party was being monitored in early 2021. While the party's chairwoman in Berlin, Dr. Kristin Brinker, is said to belong to the more moderate wing of the party, there are several key figures around her who in the past closely associated with Höcke and the *Flügel* (Kissler, 2021). This can be seen in a report from the *Antifaschistisches Pressearchiv und Bildungszentrum Berlin* (Antifascist Press Archive and Education Center Berlin, Apabiz) that was released in the runup to the 2021 elections. The report stated that at least one third of the party's Executive Board, its elected officials and those running for office in that year's election, held beliefs and positions that at the very least overlapped with those of the no longer existing *Flügel*. Especially the district association in Marzahn-Hellersdorf, home district of the party's only two directly elected members of the Chamber of Deputies Gunnar Lindemann and Jeanette Auricht, has been heavily associated with the *Flügel* in the past. Auricht was vice-chairman of the group's Berlin branch until its dissolution in 2020 and Lindemann had been known as a frequent guest at the group's events. Former chairman of the city's branch of the *Flügel* Thorsten Weiß, who organized several large conferences for the group and has been known to be good friends with Björn Höcke, the group's former leader, is also a member of the Berlin Chamber of Deputies. The acting chairman of the city's JA Martin Kohler as well as his predecessor Vadim Derksen are also regarded as

belonging to the *völkisch-nationalist* spectrum and are said to maintain contacts with right-wing fraternities and the *Identitarian Movement* (Apabiz/n.a., 2021).

The social media accounts chosen for the analysis were the ones belonging to the 16 elected representatives for the party, the state party AfD Berlin itself, the official account of the party's parliamentary group in the city's Chamber of Deputies, the youth organization JA as well as those belonging to the AfD associations in the city's twelve districts. However, not all of these will be featured in the analysis, as four party MPs as well as three district associations do not have social media accounts or did not post anything during the campaign that was of relevance to this analysis. The accounts that feature in the analysis are:

- Dr. Kristin Brinker, Party and Group Chairwoman (B.01)
- Ronald Gläser, Parliamentary Secretary, Party Spokesperson for Media (B.02)
- Thorsten Weiß, Deputy Group Chairman and Spokesperson for Education and Vocational Training (B.03)
- Jeannette Auricht, Deputy Chairwoman and Spokesperson for Labor, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities (B.04)
- Rolf Wiedenhaupt, Spokesperson for Transportation (B.06)
- Dr. Hugh Bronson, Spokesperson for Integration, Europe, Demography, and Petitions (B.07)
- Frank-Christian Hansel, Spokesperson for Economy, Energy, Climate, and the Airport (B.09)
- Harald Laatsch, Spokesperson for Urban Development, Construction, Housing, and Rents (B.10)
- Gunnar Lindemann, Spokesperson for Migration (B.11)
- Tommy Tabor, Spokesperson for Family and Youth (B.12)

- Marc Vallendar, Spokesperson for Legal Affairs, Animal Welfare, Data Protection, and Digitalization (B.15)
- Karsten Woldeit, Spokesperson for Home Affairs and Sports (B.16)
- The Parliamentary Group/Faction in the Chamber of Deputies (C.01)
- The Berlin AfD, Party on State level (C.02)
- The Young Alternative Berlin (C.03)
- AfD District 3 Pankow (D.03)
- AfD District 4 Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf (D.04)
- AfD District 5 Spandau (D.05)
- AfD District 6 Steglitz-Zehlendorf (D.06)
- AfD District 7 Tempelhof-Schöneberg (D.07)
- AfD District 8 Neukölln (D.08)
- AfD District 10 Marzahn-Hellersdorf (D.10)
- AfD District 11 Lichtenberg (D.11)
- AfD District 12 Reinickendorf (D.12)

4.3. The 2022-23 Berlin Election Campaign

On September 26, 2021, Germany held its most recent federal election. To drive turnout, both Berlin and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania decided to also hold their state-level elections that same day (Euronews/n.a., 2022). While holding several different elections on the same day already provides some logistical difficulties on its own, the *Berlin Marathon* was also held that day, shutting down much of the city's traffic and making a smooth running of the election even harder. As a result of both the day's hectic nature and bad planning by the city, the election proved to be extremely chaotic. There were very long lines outside of a number of polling stations that led to many people casting

their votes past the 6 pm deadline, there were missing ballots and ballots with the wrong names on them, some polling stations closed for several hours throughout the day, and the city mistakenly sent out faulty mail-in ballots that allowed minors to vote if an adult filed the request for them (Knight, 2023a). This systemic disorganization led to several formal complaints by political parties such as the AfD as well as the city's electoral authority, which questioned the legality and accuracy of the election. On November 16, 2022, the city's highest court thus annulled the previous year's results and decided that the local elections would have to be repeated within the next 90 days, with February 12, 2023, being selected as the date (Rinaldi, 2022).

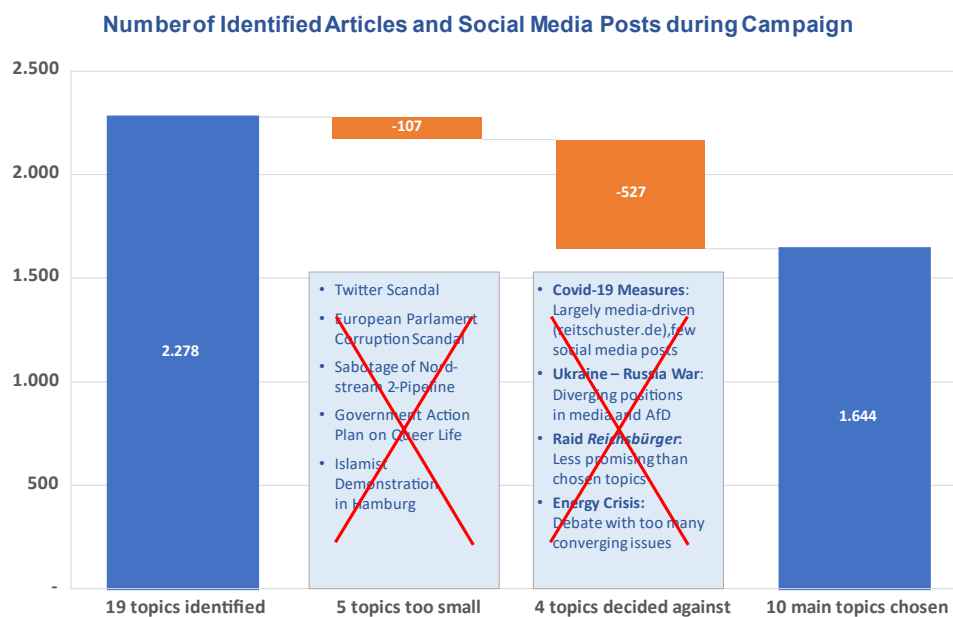
In the flawed 2021 election, the SPD was once again the strongest party with 21.4 percent, while the Greens (18.9 percent) gaining almost four percentage points and surprisingly came in second ahead of the CDU (18 percent). The AfD suffered the biggest losses, losing 6.2 percentage points to fall to just 8 percent and only placing fifth just ahead of the liberal FDP. As winners, the SPD decided to continue the ongoing three-party coalition with Greens and *DIE LINKE* (The Left), which received 14.1 percent. At the head of the coalition, the SPD's Franziska Giffey, who previously had been the *Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth* replaced her party colleague Michael Müller as Mayor of Berlin (Tagesschau/n.a., 2021; Menzel, 2021). The 2023 repeat election saw the CDU come out as the clear winner, as they gained 10.2 percentage points and won. With 28.2 percent, they placed clearly ahead of both SPD who lost 3 percentage points and Greens who lost 0.5, both ending up at 18.4 percent. Even though they saw themselves as one of the main driving forces that made the court case and the rerun happen, the AfD only managed slight gains, raising their voter share by 1.1 percentage points to 9.1 percent (Tagesschau/n.a., 2023). As winners, the CDU

chose to enter a coalition agreement with the SPD, unseating Franziska Giffey and replacing her with Kai Wegner (CDU) as Mayor of Berlin (Caspari, 2023).

At this point, the themes and topics that came up most often during the analysis, both in articles from right-wing alternative media, as well as in posts from social media accounts associated with the party, will be briefly introduced. The categories called *Main Topics*, later numbered and grouped, were developed while going through the articles in the selected media outlets and the posts on AfD social media accounts and either cover different stories and topics that fit under a thematic umbrella or were such important news stories, that they received their own category.

Figure 4: Reduction of Investigated Articles and Posts to Selection

Berlin State Election 2022-23 Campaign, 16.11.2022 - 12.02.2023.



Source: Own data collection and analysis

Figure 4: Reduction of Investigated Articles and Posts to Selection

- **1.1 Migration and Asylum (334 articles/posts):** Into this category fall articles and posts discussing more general immigration issues such as the asylum-crisis the coun-

try was supposedly facing at the time, government policy proposals to simplify naturalization and residence law or government funding for maritime rescue organizations like *United4Rescue* (Karnitschnig, 2023; United4Rescue/n.a., 2022).

- **1.2 Neukölln, Riots on New Year's Eve (201 articles/posts):** The turn of the year saw clashes between partygoers and police that resulted in riot-like scenes and attacks on law enforcement and several hundred arrests, especially in the socially disadvantaged and migrant-heavy district of Neukölln. This event was quickly seized on by the Right, as early reports stated that many of the arrestees were said to have an immigrant background (Whittle, 2023). This story could also be grouped under the broader themes of *Migration and Asylum* or *General News from Berlin* but was important enough to warrant a separate inclusion.
- **1.3 Illerkirchberg Stabbing (58 articles/posts):** On December 5, 2022, a 14-year-old girl in the small town of Illerkirchberg in Baden-Württemberg was attacked and killed with a knife on her way to school. The attack became a large topic of discussion as it soon emerged that the arrested suspect was an asylum seeker from Eritrea living in an accommodation nearby (DW/n.a., 2022). This event could also fit under the theme of *Migration and Asylum* but made enough waves to be included on its own.
- **1.4 Brokstedt Stabbing (59 articles/posts):** On January 25, 2023, a man who was later revealed to be of Palestinian origin attacked passengers on a train near Brokstedt in Schleswig-Holstein, killing two and injuring others (DW/n.a., 2023). This story was seized on similarly to the attack in Illerkirchberg, especially because the attacker had an extensive criminal record, and is therefore also included by itself.
- **2.1 Climate Protests (206 articles/posts):** This category includes all relevant stories and posts about ongoing protest actions by groups protesting governmental climate policy like the *Letzte Generation* (Last Generation). Most of these articles/posts deal

with how protesters who were disrupting traffic, public events and places by glueing themselves to the ground or other surfaces should be treated by the public, police, and government and how they should be viewed as terrorists. A lot of articles and posts also attacked well-known figures in the movement such as Luisa Neubauer or Greta Thunberg.

- **2.2 Lützerath, Eviction (of pro-climate squat) (90 articles/posts):** In January 2023, the police in North-Rhine Westphalia forcibly evicted hundreds of climate protesters from the village of Lützerath, which had been cleared of its inhabitants and was set to be demolished to make space for the expansion of an adjacent mining pit. The village had been squatted to prevent the expansion and became a global news story when the state government sent several thousand police to remove them so that the expansion could go on as planned (Mathiesen, 2023). While this also fits under the broader theme of climate protests, it was a big enough story on its own to warrant a separate inclusion.
- **3.1 Culture War (197 articles/posts):** The term *culture war* generally refers to a conflict between groups that have significantly differing cultural values, beliefs and practices, which typically involves disputes over moral and social issues between conservatives and progressives. Typical *culture war* issues are the rights of LGBTQIA*-people, education, religious freedom, and gender roles and feminism (Hunter, 1991). Here, this category includes all those stories that deal with debates around topics such as gender- and race-inclusive language, transgenderism, alleged woke indoctrination of children, cancel culture, or the plans to rename the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz* (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, SPK) that do not fit elsewhere (Munzinger, 2023; Whittle, 2024; Kurbjuweit and Schult, 2022).

- **3.2 The World Cup (88 articles/posts):** In the run-up to the world cup in Qatar in late 2022, there was a large debate in Germany about whether the national team and those watching on TV should boycott the tournament due to the Qatari government's severe human rights violations during construction of the tournament venues, its general treatment of migrant workers, and its repressive laws against the LGBTQIA* community (Lauerhaß, 2021). After choosing to participate, the German team announced that its captain Manuel Neuer intended to wear a captain's armband in rainbow colors to protest the Qatari government for the team's opening game on November 23. After this was disallowed by FIFA, the team staged a protest before the game, with every player in the starting 11 covering their mouths during team pictures to signify them being silenced (Späth, 2022). Both gestures were widely mocked by the Right, even more so when the team was eliminated in the group stage, after which both media and AfD made these "distractions" responsible for the team's poor play. This topic could also be included under the *culture war*-theme, but received so much coverage that it appears here by itself.
- **4 Berlin General News (360 articles/posts):** As this case was a state campaign, the candidates and party-associated profiles also posted extensively about local issues such as the election rerun and associated court cases, the spending scandal at the state-owned broadcaster *Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg* (Berlin-Brandenburg Broadcast, RBB), as well as Berlin-specific stories that also fit into other categories such as the debate surrounding the restitution of stolen colonial art like the Benin bronzes (Knight, 2023; Halbach, 2022; Steffes-Halmer, 2021).

- **5 AfD General News (51 articles/posts):** This category contains relevant articles and posts that dealt with internal party matters and news stories about the party or individual members that are relevant but did not fit under any of the other themes, such as the party's 10th birthday in early 2023.

4.4. Hypotheses

After having gone over the essential background knowledge about the election and having introduced the most important themes and topics that the investigated media outlets and party accounts wrote about, I will now present the hypotheses that will be tested in the main section. Based on the theoretical foundations of Chapter 3, the first assumption is that the analysis will show that right-wing alternative media outlets in Germany and the AfD have a joint policy agenda they promote, not just in terms of what topics are talked about but how they are discussed as well. Building on this, the second assumption is that the media takes the more active role in this relationship, influencing the topics and narratives that accounts affiliated with the Berlin AfD promoted on their social media accounts. While the German Right has a long list of political goals, the main topics they have shown to be particularly invested in and have successfully taken over are discussions surrounding migration, how the climate protest movement should be dealt with, and the broader *culture war*. The first hypothesis therefore goes as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The interplay between the selected right-wing alternative media outlets and social media accounts affiliated with the local AfD branch during the 2022-23 Berlin state election campaign is an example of actors in both media and politics jointly engaging in *first* and *second level agenda setting* on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate protests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term *culture war*, local news, and stories about the party.

To operationalize this, the hypothesis will be split into two sub-hypotheses, each of which will be investigated separately. These are the following:

Hypothesis 1a: The selected right-wing alternative media outlets and social media accounts affiliated with the AfD promoted and focused on the same topics during the campaign, jointly engaging in *first level agenda setting* on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate protests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term *culture war*, local news from the city, and stories about the party.

Hypothesis 1b: The selected right-wing alternative media outlets and social media accounts affiliated with the AfD promoted and focused on the same narratives and solutions for the policy problems previously put on the agenda, jointly engaging in *second level agendas setting* on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate protests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term *culture war*, local news from the city, and stories about the party.

Here, the independent variables are the investigated media outlets and AfD-affiliated social media accounts, and the dependent variable is the joint engagement in *first* and *second level agenda setting* by the actors in media and politics. Building on this hypothesis is a second assumption that goes one step further, expecting that the media takes the more active role in this process and therefore can be described as engaged in *agenda building* through the party. Accordingly, the second hypothesis reads:

Hypothesis 2: The selected right-wing alternative media outlets engaged in *first* and *second level agenda building* through the party, directly influencing the topics, narratives, and policy solutions promoted by

AfD associated social media accounts during the 2022-23 Berlin state election campaign on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate protests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term *culture war*, local news from the city, and stories about the party.

Here, the independent variable is the media outlets, who are assumed to be exerting influence on the dependent variable, in this case the party-affiliated social media accounts. Following the same logic as previously, this hypothesis will also be split into two sub-hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: The selected right-wing alternative media outlets directly influenced what topics social media accounts affiliated with the Berlin AfD focused on during the election campaign, thus engaging in *first level agenda building* on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate protests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term *culture war*, local news from the city, and stories about the party.

Hypothesis 2b: The selected right-wing alternative media outlets directly influenced what narratives and solutions for policy problems accounts affiliated with the Berlin AfD focused on during the election campaign, thereby engaging in *second level agenda building* through the party on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate protests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term *culture war*, local news from the city, and stories about the party.

5. Analysis of the Right-Wing Alternative Media's Agenda Setting and Agenda Building Influence on the AfD

The following section will show the results of the *process tracing* analysis of the relevant articles and social media posts published during the election campaign and answer the research question posed in the introduction. The detailed documentation can be found in Appendix A.

5.1. Joint Agenda Setting by AfD and Right-Wing Alternative Media

In terms of the investigated media outlets and social media accounts jointly engaging in *first level agenda setting*, the analysis shows that both had a very similar topical focus during the campaign, posting about the same issues and events and complaining about the topics they cared about not receiving enough media attention (Appendix A, 5ff). This can be particularly seen in the timeline of articles and posts that shows both the investigated media outlets and social media accounts promoting issues surrounding the topic of migration at the same time, such as on November 25, when the Federal Government announced its plans to streamline and simplify naturalization and dual citizenship policies (Appendix A, Figure 5). There was also an apparent correlation between articles and posts on the topic of migrant violence spiking after the murders in Illerkirchberg and Brokstedt as well as the events of New Year's Eve in Neukölln (Appendix A, 3ff). These events were also instrumentalized to criticize both existing migration and asylum policies as well as the government's proposals.

Both the surveyed media outlets and AfD accounts frequently complained about what they perceived as censorship by *mainstream media* and government parties, which they felt refused to address important issues such as the alleged threat posed by migrants and climate protesters. One illustration of this is the frequent complaints that news agencies and police do not always disclose the nationality or status of offenders, and that the

government refused to release a list of the first names of suspects arrested on suspicion of attacking emergency services on New Year's Eve. This case is particularly exemplary, as both media and AfD accounts accused the country's preeminent news-show *Tagesschau* of deliberately manipulating the footage of the evening's events in order to obscure the role that migrants had played (Appendix A, 6f). It can also be seen in the insistence of media and AfD accounts that the authorities were supposedly ignoring the alleged ongoing radicalization of climate activists belonging to the *Letzte Generation* and were unwilling to take action them (Appendix A, 14f).

These patterns of reaction to similar events serve as examples for the attempts by the investigated media and accounts to prepare their audience to automatically associate violent actions by immigrants with the failure of government migration policies and to see inaction towards peaceful climate protesters as evidence that the government was favoring them and not taking drastic enough measures to prevent their actions (Appendix A, 13ff). The constant attacks on the credibility and alleged bias of the *mainstream media* can also be seen in the special attention that all those involved have paid to the current developments in the RBB's spending scandal, which in their opinion stood for the dishonesty and corruption of particularly *public service media* (Appendix A, 9f).

The consistent alignment and mutual reinforcement of topics between right-wing media and AfD accounts described above suggests that at some level there is likely a coordinated effort between the two aimed at promoting some of the Right's core issues. It also reinforces the idea that both are trying to impress upon their audiences that there is, for example, a direct causal link between individual acts of immigrant violence and a general failure of government migration policy. The evidence therefore supports the underlying assumption of Hypothesis 1a that both entities propagate and focus on the same topics and get their audiences to react to events in a certain way. The hypothesis passing

both the SITW and *Hoop* tests but failing the *Smoking-Gun* and Doubly Decisive tests, means that the hypothesis is probably true, but that there is not enough evidence to be completely sure of its accuracy.

There is also evidence suggesting coordinated efforts between the actors studied to promote the same or similar narratives. For example, both groups consistently proposed similar policy solutions, such as stricter controls on immigration or harsher punishment for climate activists. This can be seen in articles in *JUNGE FREIHEIT* and *Tichys Einblick*, in which the AfD's policy proposals on immigration and electoral reform are discussed positively, or in *PI-News*, which repeatedly shared texts and speeches from AfD politicians such as Björn Höcke or Dr. Gottfried Curio on topics ranging from the Neukölln riots to the government's proposed naturalization reform (Appendix A, 31f). The media examined also frequently defended AfD politicians against attacks from the Left, such as when Alice Weidel was accused of instrumentalizing the murder in Illerkirchberg for her own political advantage by linking it to a perceived migration crisis and the failure of government policy (Appendix A, 29).

Another issue where media and party narratives converged and supported each other is the question of how the government is dealing with the country's colonial legacy, both by renaming institutions and places whose names are related to the German Empire of the 19th century and restituting famous works of art stolen during the colonial period. Both the AfD and the media railed against the proposed striking of the word *Prussia* from the name of the *Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation* and the renaming of the *Bismarck Room* in the Federal Foreign Office (Appendix A, 23f). They were also angry about the restituting the famous *Benin bronzes* and attacked the responsible ministers for allegedly doing it just to score points with the public (Appendix A, 24f).

Both also took every opportunity they could to demonize peaceful climate protesters, calling members of *Letzte Generation* as terrorists for disrupting concerts or cutting off the tip of a Christmas tree, compared them to the terrorist group *Red Army Faction* (RAF), used words like *battle* to describe the eviction of the squatted village in Lützerath, called the squatters the “armed wing of the Greens” and warned of the ongoing far-left radicalization of the protesters (Appendix A, 19ff). The media and politicians were also attacked for not being tough enough on the protesters, and prominent members of the climate movement were relentlessly vilified and ridiculed (Appendix A, 21f). The denigration of political opponents was a strategy that was also used by the actors studied during the public debate about the behavior of the German team during the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. They attacked both the team and German officials for virtue signaling by stating that they are worried about the repressive anti-LGBTQIA* legislation in the host country, criticized the team and interior minister for “the politicization of sport”, gleefully reported on the affair surrounding the rainbow-colored captain’s armband, and made fun of the team’s early elimination (Appendix A, 24f).

There were also several cases that show that there seems to exist some form of cooperation between the AfD and *JUNGE FREIHEIT* in particular. For example, the newspaper published several articles with quotes from Berlin AfD politicians, published an exclusive on the party’s lawsuit against the state of Berlin for publishing the first names of those arrested on New Year’s Eve, had party chairwoman Alice Weidel publish an Op-Ed on the need for a stricter migration policy and interviewed Kristin Brinker just days before the repeat election (Appendix A, 27ff). Both in the media and party-affiliated accounts, the narrative was also spread that the so-called *old parties* had attempted to undermine the democratic nature of the political process by trying to prevent a repeat of the flawed 2021 election, which was therefore only possible because “advocates of genuine

democracy” such as the AfD and critical media such as *Tichys Einblick* had reported on it and consistently spoke on the issue (Appendix A, 8ff).

This consistency of narratives and proposed policy solutions across such a wide range of issues again suggests that there is at least some kind of coordinated effort to focus on and promote the same narratives and solutions, with both the party and the media amplifying each other’s messages to influence public perceptions and policy discussions. The evidence presented above and in the analysis in Appendix A, particularly between the party accounts and *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, serves as a necessary condition for accepting Hypothesis 1b, which has a high probability of being true. However, the evidence found in the analysis is not strong enough or sufficient to rule out alternative explanations, such as the influence of more right-leaning newspapers like *BILD*, which means that the hypothesis and the causal mechanism it identifies can only be accepted partially.

5.2. Right-Wing Alternative Media Agenda Building Through the AfD

The evidence of direct influence on AfD-run accounts by the examined outlets is less conclusive. Here, one indication is that AfD-affiliated accounts frequently shared and promoted articles from the selected outlets. In total, 7.6 percent of all analyzed social media posts shared a link or statement from one of the media outlets examined. In particular, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, which accounted for 49 out of the 56 articles shared, was presented as a relevant news source that many of the people behind the accounts seemed to read, and there were several occasions where they engaged with topics and issues they might not have been interested in or found important if the site had not written about them (Appendix A, 31ff). For example, it was reported that Interior Minister Nancy Faeser was personally responsible for stopping the deportation of a convicted rapist because her ministry refused to classify Afghanistan as a safe country to which people could be deported.

This was picked up by one of the AfD-affiliated accounts, which also blamed Faeser exclusively and complained that Germany was no longer deporting “murderers and rapists” (Appendix A, 34f). Another time the media wrote an article attacking the Berlin government for removing a cross from a miniature castle in a playground, which both the author of the article and AfD MP Ronald Gläser saw as one of many examples of the numerous attacks on Christianity by the “woke left”. Similar patterns of AfD-affiliated accounts reacting positively to news from *JUNGE FREIHEIT* that they might not otherwise have considered important could be seen in reports on a tightening of citizenship law in Sweden and a trial on Lesbos against a refugee aid worker accused of smuggling asylum seekers into Greece (Appendix A, 34).

These limited results suggest that *JUNGE FREIHEIT* seems to have had at least some influence on which topics AfD-affiliated accounts were interested in and posted about during the election campaign. However, the frequency with which they shared the content and interacted positively with it clearly indicates that the people behind the AfD-affiliated accounts read the site to get their news and value it highly enough to share their work with their followers. In the case of *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, the hypothesis passes the SITW and *Hoop* tests, as the evidence shows that AfD-affiliated accounts value the page and its coverage, which is a necessary condition for the conclusion that they also follow what topics are important to them and should present to their audience. However, the hypothesis fails the *Smoking-Gun* and *Doubly-Decisive* tests, as the evidence is only implicit and therefore not sufficient to conclude that any of the media outlets have influence over the issues that the social media accounts studied care and report on.

When it comes to right-wing alternative media outlets having influence on the narratives and political solutions promoted by the AfD accounts, there is also very little evidence, especially in the context of migration and cultural issues. The most important

case that may indicate some amount of *second level agenda building* influence is the petition to “Stop the asylum crisis (and) illegal migration!”, which was launched by *JUNGE FREIHEIT* in November 2022 and enthusiastically shared by several AfD accounts (Appendix A, 37f). Although the petition did not necessarily contain proposals that the AfD had not previously advocated, the fact that they supported and promoted a concrete policy plan that would be introduced into the Bundestag if the petition was successful can be seen as a sign that the paper and its influence on the political Right in the country is recognized and appreciated.

There are several other cases where it can be argued that one of the media outlets investigated directly influenced the narrative spread by AfD accounts. One of these was a report by *Tichys Einblick* about SPD leader Lars Klingbeil, who allegedly fabricated and knowingly spread disinformation about right-wing riots on New Year’s Eve in Saxony that was not confirmed by official sources at the time. Several party accounts and other media outlets in the sample agreed with and amplified this criticism, although none of them directly shared the website’s reporting on the issue. However, they seemed to agree with the narrative presented in the article and attacked the politician, accusing him of dishonestly trying to distract from the debate on migrant violence following the events of New Year’s Eve in Neukölln (Appendix A, 38f).

Another instance where it appeared that some of the AfD-affiliated accounts were picking up on and reinforcing narratives previously been published in *JUNGE FREIHEIT* was when Thorsten Weiß took over the framing of an interview given by the president of the German Teacher’s Association about the alleged negative impact of migrants on the performance level of students. Although Heinz-Peter Meidinger had said that there seemed to be a tendential relation between the number of children with a migrant background and the level of achievement in schools, both *JUNGE FREIHEIT* (November 24)

and Weiß (December 8) formulated it as if Meidinger had said that the increasing numbers of pupils with a migrant background was a “decisive” cause of the drop in achievement levels at elementary schools (Appendix A, 39). Several AfD accounts also supported and amplified the account of an allegedly scandalous incident in the German Bundestag in which vice president of the parliament, Katrin Göring-Eckardt, threatened to throw out visitors who had clapped and cheered to a speech by an AfD politician during a debate on a resolution to recognize the attempted genocide of the Yezidi people by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In the article and several posts containing it, Göring-Eckardt was attacked and other MPs mocked for allegedly having “screaming fits” because Yezidis in the audience clapped for the AfD MP (Appendix A, 40f). There is no instance in which an issue and its associated narrative could be said to have clearly gone through the three steps of *agenda building*, from being identified by a medium that then promotes it and later crafts a political response that was endorsed and promoted by the AfD-affiliated social media accounts studied.

These isolated cases in which the narratives disseminated by social media accounts from the sample may have been directly influenced by one of the media outlets analyzed provide little evidence to support Hypothesis 2b. While the existing evidence for a narrative influence of *JUNGE FREIHEIT* on the agenda disseminated by the accounts in the sample does pass the *SITW* test and, for a very limited number of topics, also the *Hoop test*, the evidence for the hypothesis is weak and alternative explanations need to be considered. Overall, there is insufficient evidence to accept Hypothesis 2b even partially, with Hypothesis 2a only partially valid for *JUNGE FREIHEIT*.

5.3. Discussion

The findings and conclusions of the analysis are in line with the existing research on the AfD and the right-wing alternative media ecosystem in Germany. As discussed in Chapter

4, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* is one of the most influential voices on the political Right in the country and as Ronald Gläser is a former writer for the site, it makes sense that he and his colleagues would hold the site and the opinions published in high regard. As an important voice within the country's New Right, it is likely that a medium like *JUNGE FREIHEIT* is also an *intermedia agenda setter*, with smaller outlets that publish less frequently and reach a smaller audience looking for cues as to what topics and narratives to focus on. This is indeed very likely, because as discussed in Chapter 4, right-wing alternative media ecosystems are tightly networked communities that often link and reinforce each other to increase their reach while further radicalizing their readers.

It could therefore be that although there are offerings within the alternative right-wing media landscape that influence the agenda of both the AfD and other news sites such as *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, there are also those whose agenda is influenced by other sites and the party rather than the other way around. In fact, there is evidence of this in the sample, as *PI-News* has republished posts and speeches from AfD politicians such as Björn Höcke and Dr. Gottfried Curio as well as videos by *Achtung, Reichelt!* on numerous occasions. The analysis also did not necessarily rule out the possibility that the AfD plays a greater role in setting the agenda of the broader political Right than initially thought, although this would need to be investigated more thoroughly.

The topics and narratives that the channels and accounts examined focused on were also to be expected. The articles and posts attacked the government for not being tough enough on immigration and climate protesters. They stoked fears of migrant violence and engaged in debates about the perceived excesses of *woke* ideology in the *culture war*. They accused the media of being pro-government and withholding information from the public or even outright lying, presenting themselves as the side that stood for the *silent majority* of ordinary people against the powerful and corrupt elites in power.

However, there are some interesting observations and conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis. For example, on the issue of responsibility for the repeat election, it is interesting that both the party and *Tichys Einblick* attempted to take full responsibility for making the election happen and made no mention of each other's efforts or involvement. This suggests that while their priorities on the matter were aligned, there appeared to be no coordination between them. Over a year later, in May 2024, the German newspaper *Tagesspiegel* even reported that five different people, including both Tichy and Brinker, were arguing about which of them could claim responsibility for the successful court case and the rerun of the election (Maroldt, 2024). While disagreement on a single issue does not mean that the party and the site cannot work together on other things, it bears mentioning and warrants further investigation into their relationship.

It is also interesting that the social media accounts close to the Berlin AfD, although they seemed to agree on many issues, did not share any articles from *COMPACT Magazin*, and hardly any from *PI-News* and *Achtung, Reichelt!* although Reichelt's new platform *Nius* is likely to be more popular than his YouTube channel at the time. One reason why AfD politicians may shy away from the overtly radical content offered by the now-banned *COMPACT* or by *PI-News* is that many of them may prefer not to be directly associated with the negative reputation of these sites, and that while they read and agree with them privately, they do not necessarily want this to become public knowledge.

Media such as *JUNGE FREIHEIT* and *Tichys Einblick*, on the other hand, are less extreme in their choice of words and outward appearance and can therefore be regarded as less controversial sources or references. In view of the observation of the party by the *Verfassungsschutz* and the call for it being banned, many functionaries in the party may also feel that they want to appear more moderate in order to avoid further investigations

or prosecution. It should also be mentioned that there are considerable ideological differences between the outlets selected for the sample and that the AfD is not a monolith either. Rather, there are different ideological camps within the party, such as the grouping around the members of the now officially disbanded *Flügel*. The comparative moderation of a party leader like Brinker may also have played a greater role than expected.

It is also not very likely that there is an actual active effort to coordinate issue selection and messaging between a state party and nationally focused news outlets. If there is a concerted effort by party members and news outlets within the right-wing alternative media ecosystem working together to advance a common agenda, it is most likely only happening at the national level, with state parties and their members just following the general party line or their favored group within the party. It should also be noted here that the choice of media may not have been ideal. Although the data did not reveal any glaring omissions, the accounts examined occasionally shared articles from and interacted with other sites that fall within the alternative-right spectrum, such as *Achse des Guten*. Berlin AfD politician Gunnar Lindemann, for example, also gave interviews to the *Deutschland Kurier* and Frank-Christian Hansel published a guest article in *Freilicht Magazin* during the campaign. All three websites would have fit ideologically with the premise of the study, but were rejected due to their limited reach, ideological redundancies, and the limited size of the sample examined.

6. Contextualization, Conclusion, and Outlook

Overall, the results of the analysis show that right-wing alternative media and social media accounts affiliated with the Berlin AfD largely focused on similar topics during the campaign, particularly migration, climate protests, and general *culture war* issues. However, these three themes, as well as the associated narratives about the government and media lying to the population, the dangers posed by migrants and climate protesters, the excesses of *woke* ideology, and attacks on their political opponents accusing them of dishonesty, denial of reality, lack of concern for the safety of Germans were extremely consistent. The media and accounts also reacted similarly to major events that were relevant to their core issues, such as the German team's protest during the World Cup in Qatar or the eviction of the squatted village in Lützerath. The findings also show that media outlets and AfD accounts advocated similar political solutions, such as stricter immigration laws and harsher penalties for climate protesters.

JUNGE FREIHEIT stands out within the media examined as being particularly influential, not only on the party but also on the other outlets, and is the only one in the sample for which there was evidence that the site potentially had some influence on the agenda that the party accounts were promoting. This was particularly evident on issues relating to migration, where party-affiliated accounts, for example, supported a petition launched by the newspaper to "Stop the asylum crisis (and) end illegal migration!". Overall, the findings allow an affirmation of H1 and a partial affirmation of H2 for *JUNGE FREIHEIT*. In contrast, other media outlets such as *PI-News* appear to be more influenced by the party than vice versa, suggesting that actors on both sides can be involved in *agenda building* without one side necessarily taking the overall lead.

These findings support results of previous studies that have found an almost symbiotic relationship between right-wing alternative media outlets and the AfD, with both

supporting and reinforcing each other to reach and radicalize ever larger audiences. When successful, this contributes to the ongoing polarization of media consumption, which shifts political discourse and public opinion to the right and can lead to outcomes like the one described in the introduction. In the fall, this now year-long practice of mutual reinforcement could even contribute to the AfD becoming part of a German state government for the first time. Of course, these developments are not unique to Germany. In many other countries, both in Europe and across the world, right-wing parties and the associated media ecosystem have grown simultaneously.

While the results are in line with expectations, the limitations mentioned in the introduction restrict the possible conclusions, as the lack of a control group from more mainstream news media and parties and the focus on social media posts are likely to distort the results. Nonetheless, both the overall case and individual findings suggest that the relationship between right-wing alternative media and the AfD is most likely very similar in other German states and at the federal level, although there may be some ideological differences depending on the respective political affiliations of the party officials and bodies under investigation.

The study and its findings raise other interesting questions for further research which could be worthwhile. On the one hand, it would be interesting to investigate how the spread of these narratives affects public opinion and voting behavior. To this end, surveys or experiments could be conducted to measure changes in attitudes and the concrete effects of right-wing agenda setting. It would also be interesting to repeat this study in a different national context to see whether the observed mechanisms exist in other places and which issues are particularly emphasized. Longitudinal studies that track changes in media influence over time could also be interesting to better capture the impact of right-wing narratives have on the political climate or changes in media consumption.

With the recent ban of the *COMPACT Magazin*, Germany has shown that it is not willing to stand idly by and watch the further shift to the right of these media and the radicalization of an ever-larger part of the population. In view of the expected electoral success of the AfD in the fall, monitoring and, if necessary, criminal prosecution of particularly extremist elements both in the right-wing alternative media sphere and in the party must remain an option in the future. Aside from media literacy initiatives to better educate the public on identifying biased and potentially misleading news sources, robust regulation and oversight bodies that curb disinformation and extremist narratives in the media remain the best tools that democracies have to defend themselves against the threat of the far Right. A strong and vigilant civil society as well as media watchdogs and organizations that counteract far-right narratives are also crucial to hold these media and parties accountable and counter their rhetoric. Furthermore, there should be ongoing and continuous research and public debates on these issues, especially on the interaction between media and politics, as their relationship remains highly dynamic and evolving.

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Appendix A: Process Tracing Tests

The following section provides a comprehensive documentation of the *process tracing* tests performed to evaluate the hypotheses formulated in Chapter 4.4 and the evidence supporting our decisions to accept or reject them. As outlined in Chapter 2.1, *process tracing* generally involves four crucial tests, the *Straw-in-the-Wind*, *Hoop*, *Smoking-Gun*, and *Doubly-Decisive* tests. In conducting the tests, I will follow the classic approach of first developing a causal chain of observations, presenting evidence for it from the collected data, and then assessing whether the hypotheses meet the necessary and sufficient conditions to pass any of the tests. Since the data collected is exclusively from the alternative right-wing media ecosystem and the Berlin AfD, and the political discourse and decision-making have too many intervening variables and factors to completely rule out alternative explanations, it is unlikely that there is enough evidence for any of the hypotheses to fully pass the *Smoking-Gun* and *Doubly-Decisive tests*. Nonetheless, the evidence points to the existence of a mechanism suggesting that the media and the party as a whole are jointly involved in *agenda setting* and that the media, through the party, *build* the *agenda* on a small number of specific issues.

Hypothesis 1a: First Level Agenda Setting

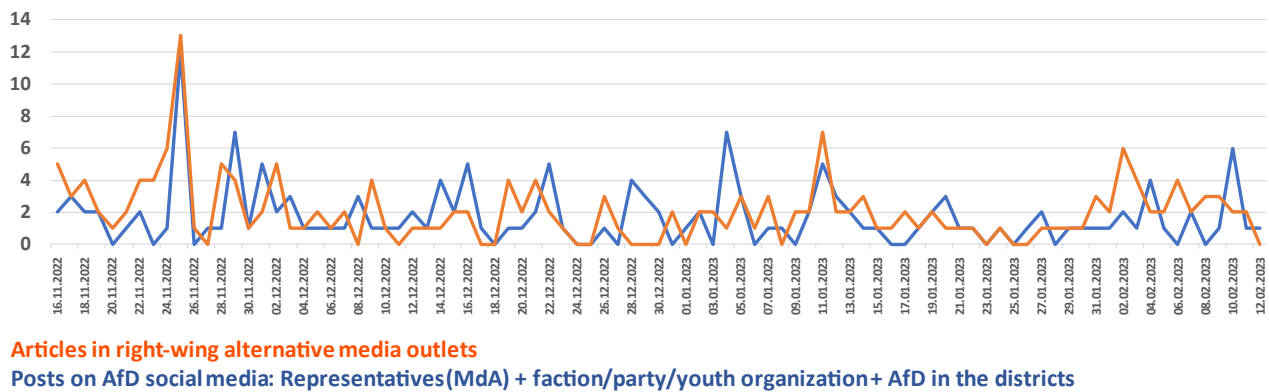
The selected right-wing alternative media outlets and social media accounts affiliated with the AfD promoted and focused on the same topics during the campaign, jointly engaging in *first level agenda setting* on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate protests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term *culture war*, local news from the city, and stories about the party.

Observation: The investigated outlets and accounts continuously published a lot of articles and posts on the topic of migration and asylum, especially during events that are relevant to them and can be instrumentalized.

Evidence: The timeline below shows the number of articles and posts on the topic of migration over the investigated timeframe. It shows that both the investigated outlets and social media accounts wrote more about the issue on the same days, suggesting some form of coordination.

Figure 5: Main Topic 1.1. Migration and Asylum

Berlin State Election 2022-23 Campaign, 16.11.2022 - 12.02.2023. Number of Articles and Posts over Time



Source: Own data collection and analysis

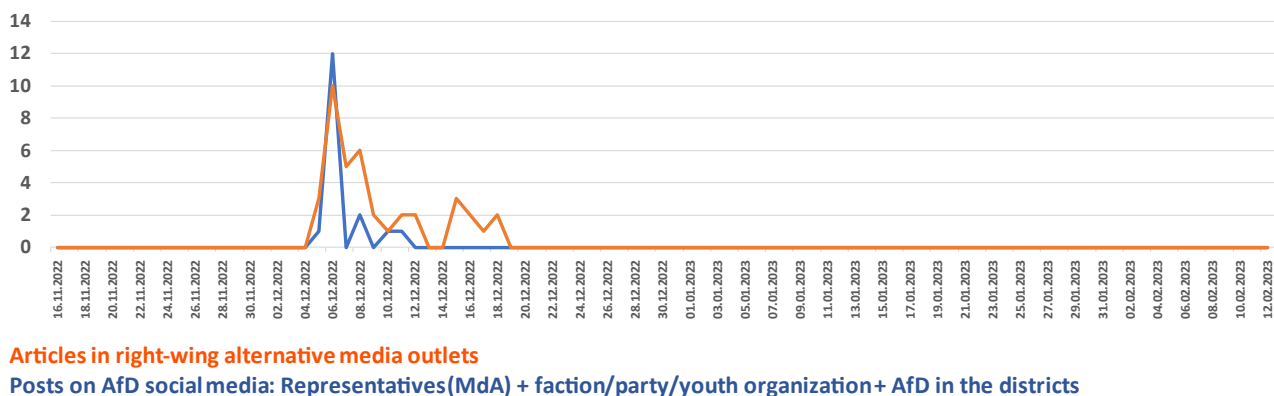
Figure 5: Main Topic 1.1. Migration and Asylum

Observation: When events occurred that could be instrumentalized for their agenda, the investigated outlets and social media accounts addressed them extensively in the immediate aftermath but stopped talking about them once the news-cycle ended.

Evidence: The number of articles and posts on the murders in Illerkirchberg and Brokstedt quickly dropped off, after the initial news-cycle around them ended.

Figure 6: Main Topic 1.3. Illerkirchberg Stabbing

Berlin State Election 2022-23 Campaign, 16.11.2022 - 12.02.2023. Number of Articles and Posts over Time

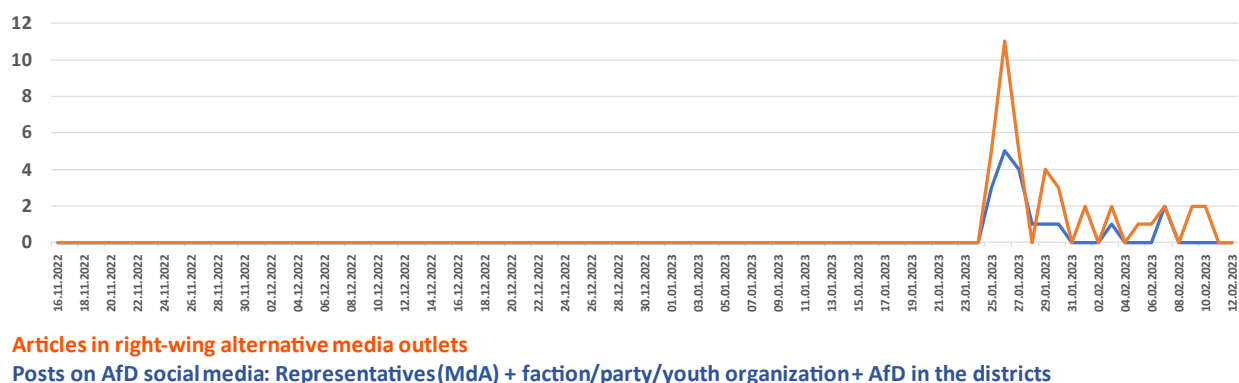


Source: Own data collection and analysis

Figure 6: Main Topic 1.3. Illerkirchberg Stabbing

Figure 7: Main Topic 1.4. Brokstedt Stabbing

Berlin State Election 2022-23 Campaign, 16.11.2022 - 12.02.2023. Number of Articles and Posts over Time



Source: Own data collection and analysis

Figure 7: Main Topic 1.4. Brokstedt Stabbing

Observation: *Alternative media outlets and AfD-affiliated social media accounts frequently pointed out and lamented that other parties and the mainstream media were allegedly downplaying, obscuring, and in some cases completely refusing to talk about certain topics that did not fit into their preferred narrative or they wished for the public to ignore.*

Evidence: When the first news about the killings in Illerkirchberg and Brokstedt emerged, many *mainstream media* outlets did not disclose the nationality, status, and ethnic background of the perpetrators. Right-wing alternative media and the AfD saw this as an act of suppression of news, deliberately keeping the public in the dark. They responded to this omission by decrying censorship and attacking other outlets for their hesitance to disclose information they viewed as relevant. This is exemplified by an article from *COMPACT Magazin* published two days after the murder, on December 7, 2022. Under the headline “Name the country of origin of the perpetrators”, Jürgen Elsässer’s site wrote that the media was refusing to publish information that was of relevance and interest to the public (1.3. Illerkirchberg, 29). A day earlier, on December 6, *Tichys Einblick* ran a report in a similar direction, pointing out how the public broadcaster ARD’s flagship news-show only dedicated a mere 80 seconds to the incident and did not even mention “relevant details that were already publicly available at the time” (1.3. Illerkirchberg, 18).

Evidence: Similarly, after the attack in Brokstedt on January 26, 2023, the Facebook account of the *Norddeutscher Rundfunk* (North-German Broadcasting Station, NDR) was attacked by commenters for not immediately disclosing the suspect’s Palestinian background and status as an asylum seeker. The page’s admin defended this editorial decision by pointing out that they carefully selected what facts to disclose immediately after an event where they did not have all information and as they believed that publishing the suspect’s nationality or ethnic background was not necessarily relevant to the report and would lead to discriminatory generalizations and racism, chose to omit it. In a further comment the station argued that by attempting to keep their comment sections free of racism they were not engaged in censorship but were rather trying to “preserve democracy”. This was picked up in *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, who on the same day published an article attacking the broadcaster’s decision, mocking their alleged commitment to democracy and decrying that they were censoring their readers by closing the initial post’s comments (1.4. Brokstedt, 14). On the same day Ronald Gläser, the Berlin AfD’s media spokesperson posted a similar sentiment on his telegram channel, sharing a screenshot of

the Facebook-interaction with a statement saying that he was “speechless” at the suggestion that “sweeping the origin of a perpetrator under the carpet serves democracy” (1.4. Brokstedt, 11).

Evidence: Not even two days after the clashes between partygoers and police on New Year’s Eve in Neukölln, *reitschuster.de* published an article under the headline “The elephant in the room: it’s not firecrackers that are our problem! What you are not meant to know about the New Year’s Eve Battle” in which he slammed media and political actors for once again refusing to talk about migrant criminality and violence. On the same day his site additionally ran a story alleging that “the elites” were once again engaging in “Another attempt at silencing” (1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 16, 27). Also on January 2, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* believed to have identified a “prescribed silence about New Year’s Eve rioters” in the media. The story was also shared by Jeannette Auricht, the first deputy chairwoman of the Berlin-AfD, on her Facebook page (1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 22, 26). On January 3, Thorsten Weiß, Deputy Chairman of the party’s parliamentary group in the Berlin Chamber of Deputies, called the debate about the clashes an “egg dance”, “because no one in the media dares to call a spade a spade” and clearly state that the events in Neukölln were the result of “an integration problem” (1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 50). As the week went on and there was more reporting on the issue with the investigated media outlets and party accounts calling out specific outlets, politicians and broadcasters for their alleged silence on the matter of migrant criminality. In a video published January 4, on his YouTube-channel, which was also shared by *PI-News* on their website, Julian Reichelt detailed how one of the country’s premier news programs, the *Tagesschau*, was supposedly lying about the immigrant violence that had taken place (1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE 52). Attacks on the program were also echoed in articles in *Tichys Einblick* (“Tagesschau cuts off reality: How the ARD is manipulating its report on the New Year’s Eve riots”) and *reitschuster.de* (“Cheap trick with the scissors: Broadcaster takes its viewers for fools - New Year's Eve: Embarrassing ARD manipulation exposed”) as well as a Facebook-post from the AfD Spandau’s page, who also accused the broadcaster of cutting and manipulating footage (Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 70, 57, 65). Similar sentiments were shared by party Chairwoman Kristin Brinker and Ronald Gläser who both published video statements talking about the alleged suppression of compromising footage that were subsequently disseminated over the party’s channels (1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 71, 80, 81, 91, 92, 94, 95).

Evidence: On January 4, 2023, then mayor Franziska Giffey made her first public statement on the events of New Year's Eve in a thread on Twitter/X, in which she expressed her solidarity with the police and firefighters who had been on duty that night, promised the perpetrators that the brutality that had been on display would have severe consequences and pointed that out that aside from the justice system, it was also on schools and youth welfare services, as well as those in the field of integration and social work to get to the bottom of the "discharge of violence" that had been on display that night. This statement was quote-tweeted by the official account of the Berlin-branch of the Young Alternative who expressed exasperation that it had taken the mayor a full four days to come out with a statement. They went on to suggest that she probably "would have liked to keep the issue quiet" (1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 59).

Observation: *Going together with the previous observation, the media outlets and AfD accounts did not just point towards a perceived refusal by media and government to speak about potentially inflammatory subjects like migrant violence, but also made sure to specifically highlight these issues themselves.*

Evidence: On January 2, 2023, just two days after the events of New Year's Eve, Frank-Christian Hansel, another member of the city's Chamber of Deputies for the AfD posted a link to a video-report from *Berlin-Brandenburg Broadcasting* about the clashes with the caption "New Year's Eve war in Berlin: From min 4.45 onwards, clear words (...) on the migrant milieu!" (Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 25). By framing it in such a way, Hansel clearly suggested that he thought the conversation around the riots had, up to that point, been circumventing the core issue of migrant violence and attempted to divert attention from what he believed was the main problem. On January 3, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* believed it was newsworthy enough to report that with Herbert Reul, interior minister of North-Rhine Westfalia, the first national politician not from the AfD had finally said that the violent excesses of New Year's Night were the result of a "migrant problem" (Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 29). The same day, *COMPACT Magazin* published a story that quoted a report by BILD which read that "among other languages the perpetrators also spoke Arabic" under the headline "the perpetrators spoke Arabic", thereby suggesting that all and not just some of them spoke the language (Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 32).

Evidence: When the Berlin police began publishing information about their investigation into the events of New Year's Eve on January 6, they announced that they had arrested a total of 145 people suspected of attacking emergency services with fireworks, 45 of which

were German citizens. A report by *WELT* however unearthed that a quarter of those with German citizenship were dual citizens, suggesting that the city was trying to downplay the overrepresentation of those with a migratory background. This prompted the Lichtenberg-AfDs Facebook account to comment on the article, stating that “the overwhelming proportion of migrants among the New Year’s Eve perpetrators can no longer be denied” (1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 104). *JUNGE FREIHEIT* reacted to this news in a similar direction, writing on January 6, that “many “German” suspects also had foreign passports” with the word “German” being in quotation marks and clearly implying they did not think those people to be real Germans (1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 100). When the police published a corrected list of suspects that was reduced to just 38 people being arrested in connection with the firework-attacks on January 9 that now asserted that two thirds of those were German citizens, the Lichtenberg district commented: now that “they have allegedly done a proper count again and “ta-da”! Most of the arrested New Year’s Eve rioters (...) are now suddenly said to be “German””. Referencing the *WELT* story about the dual citizenships, the account then went on to ask, “How stupid do they think we are?”, indicating that they believed the media was omitting facts and lying to the public (Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 142).

Observation: *When Berlin’s Constitutional Court officially announced that it was going to annul the 2021 state and municipal elections on November 16, 2022, both the AfD and right-wing alternative media immediately claimed that it was only due to their tenacious reporting, that the issue had even been addressed and not disappeared from the radar.*

Evidence: On the day of the announcement, *Tichys Einblick* published an article under the headline “TE makes fairytale happen – Persistent, honest journalism led to a repeat of the Berlin election” crediting their own investigative reporting with unearthing the mistakes and problems of the previous election, thereby decisively contributing to the court case that had led to the rerun (4. Berlin, 5). Similarly, on November 16, and 17, several party accounts such as those belonging to Marc Vallendar, Gunnar Lindemann, Ronald Gläser, the Tempelhof-Schöneberg district, the parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies and party chairwoman Kristin Brinker published statements claiming the court’s decision as a victory for themselves and even though a number of actions had been filed against the election, it had been their party’s lawsuit that made it happen (4. Berlin, 11, 12, 17, 15, 3, 31, 35, 22, 23).

Evidence: Because many in the party and investigated media were also of the opinion that the city should additionally also repeat its portion of the 2021 federal election, they continued to speak on the issue. On January 8 *Tichys Einblick* who had been on the beat of attacking the integrity of the election for a while, announced that they were filing an “election review complaint with the Federal Constitutional Court over the issue”. On the same day, as reported in *PI-News*, the AfD parliamentary group in the Bundestag also announced that they would be filing their own lawsuit over the matter (4. Berlin, 238, 239).

Observation: *Throughout the election campaign both the party and alternative media outlets consistently reported on new developments in the then ongoing scandal about mismanagement, self-enrichment and lack of oversight at the state-owned Berlin-Brandenburg Broadcasting, seeking to keep the scandal in the public eye and sparking a discussion about the need for fee-financed public broadcasting in the first place.*

Evidence: Especially Roland Gläser, the party’s spokesperson for media matters consistently posted about new developments in the scandal especially complaining about the “greed of RBB managers” (November 17), that something like this was “only conceivable in a red-green swamp like the public broadcasters” (November 18), decrying a “self-service mentality” at the organization’s executive level (November 21) complaining how the public’s money “has been squandered for years and stuffed into the pockets of friends” (December 1), and wondering how much cash a departing director would get as a “parting gift” (December 10) (4. Berlin, 33, 41, 64, 113, 150). *Tichys Einblick* and *JUNGE FREIHEIT* portrayed the story similarly, both running stories on November 21st about how the “rip-off at RBB continues under new director at the expense of taxpayers” and how the station was continuing to “throw away money” even under new management (4. Berlin, 67, 60). While public interest in the matter seemed to die down over the ensuing weeks, On January 21st, an author in *JUNGE FREIHEIT* called the broadcaster the “most expensive perpetuum mobile in the country” (4. Berlin, 276) and a week later, on January 28, *reitschuster.de* bemoaned “money-grubbing” at the station and that “measure and center have been completely lost” (4. Berlin, 291). A week later and less than ten days before the election, on February 3, Reitschuster’s site discussed an apparent new development in the ever-increasing scandal that now also involved a prominent member of the Greens. Writing that “by now no week goes by without negative headlines about the wastefulness”

at the station he accused a former director of engaging in nepotism towards Berlin's former senator Ramona Pop (4. Berlin, 317). A development the Lichtenberg-AfD commented on the same day with the short statement that "green corruption can now no longer be hidden" (4. Berlin, 314).

Inference: The evidence presented above suggests a coordinated focus on specific topics among both right-wing alternative media outlets and AfD-affiliated social media accounts, particularly on issues such as migrant criminality, perceived censorship by *mainstream media* and government, and the wasteful spending of mainstream public broadcasters. This alignment indicates a shared agenda between them. Both media outlets and AfD social media accounts also seem to be reinforcing each other's narratives, like when they were both highlighting the refusal of mainstream outlets to disclose certain details about the nationality of alleged perpetrators of various crimes or assumed responsibility for making the court case about the annulment of the 2021 election happen. By consistently highlighting the same topics, criticizing *mainstream media* and political actors for alleged biases, censorship, and downplaying potential dangers to the public, the right-wing alternative media and AfD social media accounts effectively set the agenda for their audience.

Conclusion: H1a, asserting that right-wing alternative media outlets and AfD-affiliated social media accounts promoted and focused on the same topics during the campaign, thereby jointly engaging in *first level agenda setting*, passes the *Straw-in-the-Wind* and *Hoop* tests. While passing these tests is not sufficient for ruling out alternate explanations, the coordinated action between the right-wing alternative media and AfD Berlin social media shown above is necessary for concluding that both are engaging in *first level agenda setting* on several topics, especially when it comes to issues surrounding the topic of migration.

Hypothesis 1b: Second Level Agenda Setting

The selected right-wing alternative media outlets and social media accounts affiliated with the AfD promoted and focused on the same narratives and solutions for the policy problems previously put on the agenda, jointly engaging in *second level agenda setting* on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate pro-tests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term *culture war*, local news from the city, and stories about the party.

Observation: *In the immediate aftermath of brutal crimes allegedly committed by migrants, the investigated media and social media accounts make government policy responsible for the act, thereby pushing the dual narrative that the current government is not interested in protecting its citizens from dangerous foreigners and that only the AfD and stronger controls on migration can stop similar crimes from occurring in the future.*

Evidence: Just one day after the first of the two murders, on December 6, deputy chairman of the AfD's group in the Berlin Chamber of Deputies Thorsten Weiß posted a tweet declaring that "the murder of #Illerkirchberg is a direct consequence of left-wing migration policy". He also ties the issue to the campaign by stating that "In #Berlin, the SPD, the Greens and the Left even want to increase mass immigration" (1.3. Illerkirchberg, 14). He expanded on this in a longer post on Facebook, which read that "the child might still be alive if the law had been enforced", which in his mind raised "the question of political responsibility for terrible crimes of this kind" (1.3. Illerkirchberg, 15). *JUNGE FREIHEIT* went in a similar direction, publishing at least three articles on the matter that day. The first of these sought to juxtapose the reactions from the AfD with those from other parties. Under the headline "After girl's murder: AfD demands consequences – Left demands "keeps your mouth shut" they compared the initial official statement from AfD chairwoman Alice Weidel who decried that "the routine phrases from politicians of the governing parties after the Illerkirchberg massacre are a mockery for all citizens who rightly fear for the life and limb of their children and families" with statements from left-wing politicians like MP Bernd Riexinger who called out the AfD for instrumentalizing the murder, stating that "Instead of mourning the dead girl in Illerkirchberg, pausing for a moment and keeping their mouths shut, the AfD-Nazis immediately use the opportunity to incite hatred against refugees (1.3., Illerkirchberg, 7). Other headlines the site ran that day asked, "What if it had been my child?" and called the murder "not an isolated case" (1.3, Illerkirchberg, 19, 22). Party radical Björn Höcke went even further. In a statement,

which was shared by the Neukölln district's Facebook account, he claimed that the "citizens of Illerkirchberg invited the murderer to their town by giving 35 percent to the Greens in the last election", directly drawing a connection between the crime and current government policy (1.3. Illerkirchberg, 24). Reports and posts published over the next few days continued on these themes, blaming governmental policy and inaction, attacking those who viewed it as an isolated incidence instead, and seeking to incite fear in readers.

- "Bloody deed in Illerkirchberg – German politicians share responsibility" (*Tichys Einblick*, 08.12.22, 1.3. Illerkirchberg, 34)
- "Refugee murdered Ece: Mothers warned of harassment, nothing happened (*Achtung, Reichelt!*, 08.12.22, 1.3. Illerkirchberg, 37)
- "Illerkirchberg is everywhere! Routine expressions of dismay" (*reitschuster.de*, 08.12.22, 1.3. Illerkirchberg, 38)
- "Whether pupils, tradesmen, children, young women or pensioners, nobody is safe in this country anymore (State Party, 10.12.22, 1.3. Illerkirchberg, 45)
- After the murder in Illerkirchberg – Uncle of Ece S. accuses: "How many more individual cases do we need?" (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 11.12.22, 1.3. Illerkirchberg, 46)

Evidence: After the atrocity in Brokstedt, media and party deployed similar talking points and narratives. Without even waiting for the initial news cycle to pass, the account of the Steglitz-Zehlendorf district AfD shared a link to an initial news story on the murder with a lengthy statement that started with "of course this is just another sad individual case" and ended, decrying that "it's sad what this country has become" (1.4. Brokstedt, 6). In reference to the Bill Murray movie, the Marzahn-Hellersdorf district party's Facebook account commented the events with "the groundhog greets us daily", implying that this type of thing happening was now considered normal, and called on readers to vote AfD if they wanted "to prevent it from happening in the future" (1.4. Brokstedt, 8). The following day, *PI-News* republished an official statement from Schleswig-Holstein-based AfD MP Gereon Bollmann who called "the expressions of condolences from the old parties and the Prime Minister (...) a farce and pure hypocrisy (as, according to him) it is precisely the misguided immigration and integration policies of those in power that are partly responsible for these and similar acts of bloodshed" He continued to ask "why are the mainstream press and politicians not talking straight?" (1.4. Brokstedt, 15). Also on January 26, *Tichys Einblick* titled an article on the subject with the demand "No more fine words: Otherwise, it will happen again and again" (1.4 Brokstedt, 19). AfD member of

the Chamber of Deputies Hugh Bronson similarly decried that “while the cartel parties feign sympathy, the homicides continue unabated” (January 26, 1.4. Brokstedt, 25). Claiming that only the AfD was up to the task, the Neukölln district’s Facebook account shared a post from MP Dirk Spaniel saying the murders in Brokstedt show it to be time for them to make Germany safe (29.01.23, 1.4. Brokstedt, 39). When it emerged on February 9, that the *Federal Office for Migration* had reduced the number of employees responsible for checking the protection titles of asylum seekers throughout Germany, Reitschuster and Tichy jumped on it with the former titling “Does the government share responsibility for Ibrahim A.’s murder on the train?” and the latter seeing a pattern of a “monumental failure of the authorities” (1.4. Brokstedt, 56, 59).

Observation: *Both party-accounts and the investigated media drew parallels between the supposedly rising number of knife attacks in the country and migration, stoking fear and building a narrative that people should fear for their safety.*

Evidence: On December 4, just one day before the attack in Illerkirchberg Thorsten Weiß wrote a lengthy Facebook status about knife crime in the city. Citing an investigation by BZ-Berlin that had found circumstantial evidence suggesting that a majority of the perpetrators of knife crime in the city were migrants. He then went on to argue that the debate around a potential knife ban was a “sham” and that “the patrol officers know very well who they should be looking for – but if they do, the state government will surely stab them in the back (...) because for political reasons alone nobody wants to admit that this form of violence is also a socio-cultural problem” (1.4. Brokstedt, 1). The supposed knife crime epidemic in the country was brought up again in the aftermath of the Brokstedt-attacks, evidenced by articles such as one published by *COMPACT Magazin* on January 27, under the headline “Germany: The nation of knife attacks” (1.4. Brokstedt, 27). On the same day, deputy chairman of the AfD group in the Berlin Chamber of Deputies Karsten Woldeit posted a graphic captioned “are these all isolated cases?” with screenshots of headlines about other crimes involving knife attacks that had taken place that day (1.4. Brokstedt, 33/34). Similarly, the print edition of *JUNGE FREIHEIT* on February 3, asked “Knife attacks in Germany – who will stop the madness?” beating the same drum as others, thereby seeking to contribute to the narrative that the country was facing a knife crime epidemic that was getting out of control (1.4. Brokstedt, 47).

Observation: *The investigated media and AfD-affiliated accounts took every opportunity to demonize peaceful and non-violent climate protesters, warning off their radicalization,*

comparing them to terrorists, calling for the government to crack down, trying to legitimize violence against them and building themselves up as the only party that would actually tackle the issue.

Evidence: One of the AfD's campaign posters and most repeated demands during the election campaign was the slogan "Climate gluers to jail!". After the poster presentation had taken place in late November, Frank-Christian Hansel called it "his favorite", with others like Gläser (November 29), Brinker (December 5), and the State Party account (December 5) echoing his view (2.1. Climate Protests, 63, 86, 87). This demand was also brought up again whenever the so-called *Letzte Generation* (Last Generation) staged one of their protests, gluing themselves to roads to block traffic, disrupting concert performances and airports or cutting off the tip of the Christmas tree in front of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin.

- The #climategluers want to abolish "the system" and are sabotaging infrastructure to do so. In fact, it would at least be appropriate to spy on them to prevent their #crimes and throw the organizers in #jail (Frank-Christian Hansel, 08.12.2022, 2.1. Climate Protests, 94)
- Sharing campaign poster with the slogan "Climate gluers to prison" as a reply to a post by the Letzte Generation (State Party, 12.12.2022, 2.1. Climate Protests, 101)
- "Cutting down Christmas trees will definitely not save the #climate - but imprisoning these self-proclaimed #climate activists will help us all" (District Reinickendorf, 22.12.2022, 2.1. Climate Protests, 133)
- "On one of the most closely guarded squares in #Berlin, Pariser Platz in front of the Brandenburg Gate, climate comedians saw the top off a meter-high Christmas tree. At Berlin's #BER airport, #climate terrorists cut through a fence to block the runways, and on the streets, emergency services are held up and #Berliners are slowed down on their way to work. It's almost unbelievable: if you want to fly from BER, you must go through meticulous checks. But not the climate terrorists who use garden shears to gain access to the taxiways in order to obstruct #airport operations. And if you go for a walk at the Brandenburg Gate, it's swarming with police officers, but #climate comedians simply set up a #lifting platform and saw off the top of a huge Christmas tree. When will the #Senator of the Interior act? The group of these crazy "climate activists" is manageable, which is why these people could also be taken into #preventive detention after a #dangerous speech, banned from the premises and consistently

enforced. But Berlin's interior senator is not acting. Remember: sawing down Christmas trees will definitely not save the #climate - but imprisoning these self-proclaimed #climate activists will help us all. There is an #alternative: climate gluers in #jail!" (District Reinickendorf, 22.12.2022, 2.1. Climate Protests, 139)

Evidence: To further push the narrative of *Letzte Generation* as a dangerous organization, both the investigated media and AfD-affiliated accounts frequently wrote stories and posts calling them terrorists, issuing warnings about the dangers of the group potentially radicalizing themselves further and dramatized their protest actions. For a collection of some of these articles and posts see below.

- "Last generation: the climate terror continues" (*COMPACT Magazin*, 19.11.2022, 2.1. Climate Protests, 30)
- "Terrorists with glue" (*COMPACT Magazin*, 20.11.2022, 2.1. Climate Protests, 34)
- Climate terrorists - It's not child's play! I look forward to your comments, write your opinion below the video. (post with video of her talking about the "Last Generation") (Kristin Brinker, 26.11.2022, 2.1. Climate Protests, 54)
- "The term "climate gluers" is too harmless" (*COMPACT Magazin*, 26.11.2022, 2.1. Climate Protests, 52)
- "A distraction from the facts - The dangerous radicalization of climate activists" (*reitschuster.de*, 29.11.2022, 2.1. Climate Protests, 62)
- "Climate terrorists: Now they're slashing tires" (*COMPACT Magazin*, 30.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 66)
- "I have been warning about the further radicalizing Climate-RAF or GRAF Green Army Faction for some time now... (Post with link to NZZ-article about new strategies from climate activists and their funding) (Frank-Christian Hansel, 04.12.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 79)
- "#KlimaRAF #airport #climate rescue madness Man, guys, how many more times????? Just one more thing (response to the closure of Munich Airport by the Last Generation with link to own YouTube video) (Frank-Christian Hansel, 08.12.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 91)
- #Climate terrorists back on the #BER tarmac. Doesn't #Faeser have 3,000 police officers here to put an end to the haunting of these left-green extremists? (Gunnar Lindemann, 08.12.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 92)

- “Brinker (AfD): “Last generation” is becoming increasingly extremist. By attempting to tear up a road in front of the Federal Ministry of Transport, members of the so-called *Last Generation* have committed the criminal offense of § 305 II StGB (attempted destruction of buildings). Dr. Kristin Brinker, Chairwoman of the AfD parliamentary group in the capital, commented on this action: "The radicalization of the self-proclaimed climate saviors is taking place at a rapid pace and in front of everyone's eyes. The state must finally stop playing down the ever-increasing number of crimes committed by this group. These are no longer just foolish pranks. The 'last generation' is becoming ever more extremist, their means ever more criminal. Politicians and the judiciary must now take swift and consistent action to counter this. As a reminder: the history of the RAF also began supposedly harmlessly with a planned pudding attack." (State Party, 04.01.23, 2.1. Climate Protests, 157)
- “Climate gluers act like a criminal organization – a clear case for the Office for the Protection of the Constitution” (*Tichys Einblick*, 08.02.23, 2.1. 194)

Evidence: Hand in hand with this type of demonization also went accusations against government, media, and authorities who were allegedly not sufficiently hard on the protesters or, in the framing of the Right, even sided with them.

- “The Media is mentally gluing itself to the streets and tarmac (*Tichys Einblick*, 26.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 55)
- “How the media, politicians and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution trivialize the climate hooligans - Too mild-mannered” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 02.12.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 76)
- "Reactions to the climate gluers – “Last generation”: too mild-mannered” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 04.12.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 78)
- "Police not allowed to do anything – “Scandal”: How Munich is making a pact with the “Last Generation” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 08.12.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 96)
- "Reaction to climate raid – Left leader defends “last generation” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 14.12.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 117)
- “Last generation” receives blessing from the very top - Bundestag Vice-President Göring-Eckardt defends climate gluers” (*reitschuster.de*, 29.12.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 143)
- "Nothing to fear? Why climate “activists can hope for passivity” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 30.12.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 145)

- “Bundestag: Climate glue and their ilk probably won't face tougher laws for their crimes - Faster, tougher, higher?” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 27.01.23, 2.1. Climate Protests, 178)
- “The state's tolerance of climate terrorists is irresponsible.” (Post with link about new actions by *Letzte Generation*) (District Lichtenberg, 08.02.23, 2.1. Climate Protests, 204)

Evidence: One news story they seized on were comments from Thomas Haldenwang, head of the *Verfassungsschutz*, who in an interview in Mid-November stated that he did not see *Letzte Generation* as an extremist organization and saw no reason to have them monitored. Media and AfD accounts immediately attacked him for it, calling him naïve. In a story about Haldenwang’s comments on November 17, *PI-News* quoted AfD MP Thomas Brandner, saying that Haldenwang’s office was being instrumentalized and making “a fool of itself”, indicating that the site and party were firmly on the same page regarding the matter (*PI-News*, 2.1. Climate Protests, 13). Other headlines and posts that went in a similar direction included among others:

- The Office for the Protection of the Constitution doesn't see any extremism in the #Klimakleber|n. They only paralyze the economy, damage works of art, hinder rescue operations... #Haldenwang #LastGeneration (Kristin Brinker, 17.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 10,11)
- "No suspicion of extremism – Head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution Haldenwang praises "Last Generation" (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 17.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 15)
- Shared article from *JUNGE FREIHEIT* about Thomas Haldewang's attitude towards the "Last Generation" (District Neukölln, 17.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 18)
- "Head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution – The bigoted Mr. Haldenwang” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 17.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 19)
- “President of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution: Climate glueers are not extremists - last generation as model democrats” (*reitschuster.de*, 17.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 20)
- "The 'Last Generation' is basically saying: 'Hey, government, you've been asleep for so long, you finally have to do something,'" Haldenwang continued, according to SWR. 'So, there's no other way to express how much you actually respect this system when you call on the officials to act. He does not currently recognize 'that this group

is directed against the free democratic basic order and in this respect, it is not an object of observation for the Office for the Protection of the Constitution', Haldenwang clarified." Spying on dissidents but turning a blind eye to genuine threats. Without words. (Post with link to article in Tagesspiegel) (Ronald Gläser, 18.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 21)""

- "Haldenwang and the "Last Generation": From the protection of the constitution to the protection of convictions" (*Tichys Einblick*, 18.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 24)
- Climate hooligans: Minister of Justice and the Office for the Protection of the Constitution are temporarily speechless (*Tichys Einblick*, 18.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 25)
- Thomas Haldenwang sympathizes with the climate extremists (*Tichys Einblick*, 18.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 26)
- "Secret service chief glorifies "last generation"" (*Achtung, Reichelt!*, 23.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 37)
- *Achtung, Reichelt!* Head of secret service glorifies green violence (*PI-News*, 24.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 38)
- "Haldenwang and the "Last Generation" - The eager vicarious agent" (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 25.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests 43)
- "Woldeit (AfD): Incomprehensible constitutional protection permits have encouraged climate extremists Karsten Woldeit, interior expert for the AfD parliamentary group in the German capital, says about the intrusion of climate extremists into the security area of BER Airport: /2" (Start of a thread on the Last Generation (Parliamentary Faction, 25.11.22, 2.1. Climate Protests, 48)

Another time, a politician was viciously attacked by both the investigated media outlets and AfD accounts for supposedly siding with the protesters, was when leftist MP and lawyer Gregor Gysi defended one of them in a court case.

- "As a celebrity and talk show wonder, left-wing lawyer Gysi can certainly choose who he wants to defend. It is all the more telling that he now chooses representatives of the climate-gluer end-time sect of all things. It speaks for itself. (Post with link to BZ-Berlin article, 30.11.22)"
- "Celebrity lawyer for "Last Generation" Gysi defends "climate gluers" in court today (30.11.22)"
- "Trial in Berlin – Gregor Gysi represents climate glue in court (30.11.22)"

- ““Last generation”: Despite mild sentence: Gysi appeals for climate sticker (01.12.22)”
- Gregor Gysi, the icon of the Left Party (formerly: SED), is defending a criminal climate gluer as a lawyer. Where does the climate gluer get so much money to be able to afford such a celebrity lawyer? Or is Mr. Gysi doing this out of conviction? (Instagram post, 07.12.22)

Observation: *Another instance where right-wing alternative media and social media accounts affiliated with the AfD used a major event that received a lot of news coverage to push the narrative that climate protesters were dangerous extremists, was during and after the eviction of the squatted village of Lützerath in January 2023.*

Evidence: The event, which effectively unfolded over several months, came to its conclusion in early January when the police of North-Rhine Westfalia carried out the village’s eviction. Protests in and around the village continued for several days after, with many prominent politicians and activists coming to the village and bringing further attention it. Throughout it all, the Right railed against the squatters and their supporters, painting the events as the state defending itself against violent and dangerous criminals who needed to be dealt with as harshly as possible. This is evidenced by their persistent and very one-sided commentary on the matter. They used extremely warlike language to describe the events, refused to talk about the reasons behind the protests, put their focus on supposed violence from protesters, showed indignation towards those who they perceived to be siding with their erstwhile enemies, and complained that right-wing protesters would have been dealt with more harshly. Some examples of this include:

- “In Lützerath, green rioting means civil disobedience” (Tichys Einblick, 08.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 6)
- “Green violence: Lützerath before the battle” (*COMPACT Magazin*, 09.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 7)
- “Molotov cocktails against police officers - The eviction of Lützerath has begun - how it happened” (*Tichys Einblick*, 10.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 12)
- “Julian Reichelt: Haldewang is partly responsible for climate terror in Lützerath” (*PI-News*, 11.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 14)
- “Climate terrorism: Over 1,000 police officers: Videos show left-wing extremist violence in Lützerath (JUNGE FREIHEIT, 11.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 15)

- “Climate terrorists: Mollis and stones in Lützerath” (*COMPACT Magazin*, 11.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 16)
- Shared post from party member Sebastian Wippel saying that the eviction is escalating due to violence from extreme left-wing activists (District Neukölln, 11.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 19)
- "Symbol of Lützerath: Green Youth closing ranks with left-wing radicals and anti-Semites" (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 11.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 20)
- “Stones, #firecrackers and #molotov cocktails in #Luetzerathbleibt. On #NewYear's Eve, the same climate idiots told us that firecrackers are harmful to the climate. But when it comes to their interests, the #climate doesn't matter. #Climate terrorists #Luetzerath” (Gunnar Lindemann, 11.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 21)
- "The ultimate goal is socialism: Lützerath: more than just climate action (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 12.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 23)
- “Climate terrorists: Now they want to spear horses!” (*COMPACT Magazin*, 13.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 31)
- “Coalfield: Left-wing extremist squatters seek a showdown with the state - Let's go to the Lütze battle” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 13.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 32)
- TRAILER: Lützerath! Climate terror as it is not shown on ARD (*Achtung, Reichelt!*, 13.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 35)
- „Lützi Radikal! Warum es in Lützerath nie ums Klima ging“ (*PI-News*, 14.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 45)
- "Demo ends in violence: Lützerath: Climate-hooligans storm opencast mine - Thunberg complains about profit motive” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 14.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 42)
- “Shared post from Beatrix von Storch about "climate terrorists building tunnels under Lützerath" (District Neukölln, 14.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 47)
- "Summary after the rally – Lützerath: Over 70 police officers injured - demonstrators complain about police violence” (*JUNGE FREIHEIT*, 15.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 48)
- “Shared post from Bundestags parliamentary group calling the "escalation of violence, climate terrorism" (District Neukölln, 15.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 56)
- It's schizophrenic: Greens, so-called *activists*, left-wing extremists, radicals united in #Luetzerath against freedom of the press. Green politics is becoming increasingly

dangerous for our constitutional state. (as answer to a Video from Lützerath) (Kristin Brinker, 15.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 50)

- "Crazy! They want the “system” gone. A real case for the Office for the Protection of the Constitution! (Post with link to YouTube-video about Lützerath and how it ""was never about the climate""") (Frank-Christian Hansel, 15.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 53)
- “Climate activists want to make Lützerath a symbol” (*Tichys Einblick*, 15.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 54)
- “Imagine if pictures like these had been taken on the fringes of the demonstrations against corona measures and what the political debate would have looked like... #Lützerath (shared with a link to a Tagesschau-article) (Kristin Brinker, 16.01.23, 2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 60)

Observation: *In the context of the eviction, right-wing alternative media in particular also attacked prominent figures in the climate movement and their political opponents, especially the Greens and the Left party, because they played down and trivialized the violence of the demonstrators.*

Evidence: Particularly Luisa Neubauer, the most well-known German activist within the *Fridays for Future* movement and global climate protest icon Greta Thunberg, who came to support the protests, were attacked for their alleged silence on the violence and property damage done by protesters and squatters. In an article published on January 9, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* attacked Neubauer for not distancing herself from the eruption of violence, a sentiment echoed several times over the next few days (2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 9). On January 13, *reitschuster.de* called the activist a “climate queen with an exaggerated sense of mission” and alleged that she was approving of stone throwing and Molotov Cocktails (2.2., Lützerath, 30). In a video published on January 12, Julian Reichelt first called the protesters in and around the village the “armed wing of the Greens” and later accused both Neubauer and Robert Habeck, member of the Greens and Secretary of Commerce, of severely downplaying the “climate terror” happening around them (2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 26). Accusations against the Greens and Left were also launched by *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, who on January 10 titled “First barricades are burning – Left Party and Greens support protests in Lützerath” and then followed up two days later with an article under the headline “Violent protesters and police equated (...) How the Greens trivialize violence” (2.2., Lützerath, Eviction, 10, 24). On January 12, the day it was announced that

Greta Thunberg would be travelling to Lützerath, *COMPACT Magazin* commented “no, not that too!” and a few days later, on January 14, summarized her visit with the headline “she came, saw nothing and was outraged” (2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 24, 43). When both Neubauer and Thunberg were invited to go on the country’s most watched Talk-Show “Anne Will” on January 16, *COMPACT* also complained that the show was rolling out the red carpet for them, instead of contesting their arguments and viewpoints (2.2. Lützerath, eviction 57).

Evidence: Shortly after the eviction in Lützerath, a video emerged showing how Thunberg was being arrested for trespassing at the demonstration. Right-wingers immediately picked up on this, as the video showed how the arresting officers waited with taking her away to allow members of the press to take pictures. Immediately believing it to be staged, Harald Laatsch mockingly commented that the police were apparently allowing “an extensive photo shoot with #Greta” (2.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 69). *COMPACT Magazin* similarly asked whether the “arrest was just fake?”, *Tichys Einblick* suggested that she was just following stage directions, Ronald Gläser summarized that “like the story of man-made global warming, many no longer know what’s fake and what’s real about the resistance in Lützerath”, and *reitschuster.de* called the whole sequence an “embarrassing police posse around holy Greta (2.2. Lützerath, eviction, 71, 72, 76).

Evidence: The investigated media outlets and AfD accounts also went after Neubauer a month earlier, when it was revealed that she had been dating journalist Louis Klamroth, who had recently been named as the host of the popular late-night talk show “Hard but Fair”. AfD Berlin chairwoman Kristin Brinker reacted to the news by doubting Klamroth’s ability to be objective and called for abolishing the country’s mandatory broadcasting license fee (2.1. Climate Protests, 112, 113). Also on December 14, *reitschuster.de* called the relationship a “problematic love” and equally questioned Klamroth and his employer’s commitment to objective reporting (2.1. Climate Protests, 115). Tommy Tabor, the party’s spokesperson for family and youth affairs sarcastically predicted that “we can now look forward to another balanced, objective GEZ-funded program” (2.1. Climate Protests, 119). On December 16, *Tichys Einblick* called the couple “Zeitgeist nobility” and *COMPACT* lamented two days later that she now had “even more influence” (2.1. Climate Protests, 122, 125).

Observation: *Both the investigated media outlets and social media accounts defended Germany’s colonial past against perceived attempts to cancel it.*

Evidence: On November 19, it was revealed that State Minister of Culture Claudia Roth was considering plans to change the name of the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz* (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), which oversees all of Berlin's state museums and has one of the largest collections of art and artifacts in Europe. Her proposal was to take the reference to Prussia out of the name, as she argued that the name stood for Germany's colonial legacy and the German Empire that had started World War I. A few days later, on December 2, the *Foreign Office* under Minister Annalena Baerbock announced that she intended to rename the so-called *Bismarck-Room* in her ministry's headquarters, as the name had similarly problematic connotations. Both decisions were swiftly attacked, with *Tichys Einblick* warning on November 19, that "the Greens now want to cancel Prussia" (3.1. Culture War, 8). The same outlet described the announced renaming of the Bismarck-Room as part of an "un-culture of deleting, annulling, wiping out, invalidating, erasing" and "a distortion of history" (3.1. Culture War, 32). On December 8, the Facebook account of the AfD Lichtenberg reacted to the announced renaming by expressing concern that the name Bismarck was being erased from history and that if voters "want to preserve German culture, (they) have to vote AfD" (3.1. Culture War, 42). On December 16, *COMPACT Magazin* attested that minister Baerbock had "no sense of history" and was deliberately engaging in a "great purge" of German historical figures (3.1. Culture War, 51, 52). On December 27, the AfD Lichtenberg Facebook page shared a press release from Marc Jongen, AfD member of the European Parliament, who proclaimed that "with her fight against Prussia, Minister (...) Roth has reached the level of a cancel culture activist" (3.1. Culture War, 71). On December 28, *Tichys Einblick* called her the "Minister of State for the Destruction of Culture" and lamented that "Culture has no place in the Green's republic" and *JUNGE FREIHEIT* titled that by renaming the foundation "a state principle is to be cancelled" (3.1. Culture War, 73, 76). On January 8, the outlet identified "Prussia as the epicenter of the culture war" and on January 11, *Tichys Einblick* warned that without Prussia as part of our collective memory, we were looking towards "a historical memory cleansed in green" (3.1. Culture War, 102). As the debate developed further, Frank-Christian Hansel posted on January 16, that he and the party promised to "honor the Prussian heritage". Similarly, in early February the AfD's parliamentary group in the Bundestag announced their intentions to dedicate a room within the parliament to Bismarck, an idea that was enthusiastically shared by the Lichtenberg AfD's Facebook page (3.1. Culture War, 190).

Evidence: On December 19, ministers Roth and Baerbock travelled to Lagos, Nigeria, for the official restitution of 20 of the world-famous Benin bronzes, which had been stolen during colonial times and Nigeria had demanded back for a long time. In an article on December 20, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* called both women's decision to personally travel to Nigeria out as virtue signaling and pointed out that Baerbock's statement on wanting to use the restitution as a sign that Germany was grappling with its dark colonial past was not very relevant, since Nigeria had never been a German colony (3.1. Culture War, 59). A little over a week later, on December 29, *Tichys Einblick* summed up the site's view of the country's recent cultural policy by stating "Prussia is abolished so that Benin can live", and Gunnar Lindemann suggested that "perhaps the ladies should stay in Nigeria" since "they don't have much to do with Germany anyway" (3.1. Culture War, 77, 78). As a result of the successful restitution, public discourse soon turned towards other disputed artifacts of historical significance like the famous bust of the pharaoh *Nofretete* and the *Pergamon-Altar*. Gunnar Lindemann reacted to this by proclaiming that the ministers must be "crazy and not quite right in the head" (3.1. Culture War, 80).

Observation: *Social media accounts affiliated with the Berlin AfD and the investigated outlets attempted to use the attention given to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and the debate around how Germany and especially the National Team should act while there, to rail against diversity and woke ideology.*

Evidence: Due to the repressive anti-LGBTQIA* legislation in Qatar, the German national team and federation announced in the run up to the tournament that captain Manuel Neuer wanted to play with a rainbow-colored captain's armband as an act of protest. *PI-News* mocked this gesture in an article on November 20, by exaggeratingly proclaiming the "Hero Manuel" will create "a rainbow in the desert" (3.2., World Cup, 8). Ronald Gläser criticized the move in a tweet on November 21, because "this rainbow armband (...) is a political symbol (that) stands for cultural Marxism and has no place at a World Cup (since) if a player wore a Trump baseball cap, FIFA would ban this too" (3.2. World Cup, 10). In an interview with *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, former German national team player Carsten Ramelow also criticized the intended use of the armband, stating that "as a national team player, I wear the colors of the national team", a statement that was cheered on by Gläser, who shared a clip from the interview on his Facebook page with the comment "that's right. Nobody wants to see your rainbow armbands." (3.2. World Cup, 13, 17). When FIFA threatened to sanction the team if they went through with, what the

federation considered to be a political statement, the team relented and chose to play their games without the armband. Before their opening game against Japan, the team protested these threatened sanctions by covering their mouths with their hands, indicating that they were being censored. After losing the match, right-wingers gloated about the team's weak performance, with *PI-News* titling that the “muzzled dolts should be sent home immediately!”, *COMPACT Magazin* running their report on the game's outcome under the headline “effeminate DFB-Team loses against Japan” and Gunnar Lindemann decrying that “instead of playing decent football, our #DFB #nationalteam prefers to play gender gagga and promote #LGBTI” (3.2. World Cup, 31, 35, 28). The AfD Neukölln Facebook page shared a post from MP Beatrix von Storch saying that the team would win again if they simply stopped politicizing the sport with their “woke crap” and *Tichys Einblick* followed up the next day, stating that the loss was a “slap in the face for diversity” (3.2. World Cup, 32, 43). As the rest of tournament continued to go badly for the team, the attacks from the Right continued. On November 28, *reitschuster.de* found that the “World Cup hypocrisy reaches new heights” and an article in *Tichys Einblick* philosophized about the “pitfalls of symbolism” (3.2. World Cup, 49, 48). When the team was eliminated following their last group stage game against Costa Rica on December 1, Gunnar Lindemann proposed sarcastically that since “the Buntland Diversity Queer LGTB kickers return defeated (...) maybe the #DFB should send a German national team with a black, red and gold captain's armband to the next #World Cup?” (3.2. World Cup, 52). The following day, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* columnist Ronald Berthold identified the “theater” around the captain's armband as the reason for the team's weak performance and that day's print version of their newspaper included an article suggesting that the “politicization of football” had “broken a lot of things” (3.2. World Cup, 59, 62). A few days later, on December 7, Kristin Brinker looked back at the team's unceremonious exit from the tournament by posting that “the #performance record of the #national #soccer team shows what happens when political #loyalty is more important than sporting #performance”, seeking to establish a connection to other political developments proclaiming that “we must be careful that our country does not suffer the same fate!” (3.2., World Cup, 75, 76). On December 9, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* published an interview with Thomas Berthold, member of Germany's World Cup winning team from 1990, who talked at length about how he believed that “politics is destroying our national team” (3.2. World Cup, 77). On December 20, Julian Reichelt published a video summary of the entire tournament and proclaimed that “Germany is just embarrassing now!” (3.2. World Cup, 81). Although the public's interest

in the issue died down over the ensuing month, it reemerged in January, when it was reported that vice president of the DFB Ralph-Uwe Schaffert was quoted by the *Hildesheimer Zeitung* as having said that “if the German national team players cover their mouths like monkeys (...) you shouldn’t be surprised if they lose against Japan”. This was of course picked up by *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, who three days later, on January 20, also published an article under the headline “a slap on the wrist to start work (...) Rudi Völler takes Faeser to task”, which reported that newly appointed director of the national team Rudi Völler, had criticized interior minister Faeser for choosing to wear the banned rainbow-themed captain’s armband while watching a Germany match in the stadium in Qatar (3.2. World Cup, 83, 85). The following day, the site also ran an article about the fact that former president of FC Bayern München Uli Hoeneß had called the minister’s actions “silly and ridiculous”, with a column the following day declaring that the whole story was equal to a “red card for Nancy Faeser” (3.2. World Cup, 86, 87).

Observation: *On several occasions, JUNGE FREIHEIT interviewed or published articles about local topics with statements from members of the Berlin-AfD, suggesting that there exists some familiarity and a working relationship between the outlet and AfD politicians in the state.*

Evidence: With the ongoing energy and gas crisis, many people in Germany were worried about energy supply security and warned of potential blackouts. Of particular interest to the AfD was what would happen if a prison suffered a blackout and what would happen to the inmates if the emergency power reserves were also exhausted. On November 18, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* published an article on this question, in which they quoted Marc Vallendar, the Berlin AfD’s legal policy spokesperson, who had previously inquired with the city of Berlin about the issue in October (4. Berlin, 46). Although the city’s spokesperson did not give a definitive answer, stating that this decision depended on various factors such as water, fuel, and emergency electricity supply, the article insinuated that convicts would be released during longer blackouts. On November 21, Vallendar also shared the article with his quote on his Facebook page (4. Berlin, 59).

Evidence: On November 29, 2022, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* published an article on a lawsuit filed by the AfD against the city of Berlin, because the other parties in the city’s Chamber of Deputies did not allow them to appoint the four city counselors they had received after the previous year’s election. The article quoted both party spokesperson Ronald Gläser and parliamentary group leader Kristin Brinker describing the situation as a “systematic

blockade (...) against the spirit of democracy”, with Gläser later sharing the story on his Twitter/X-account (4. Berlin, 111).

Evidence: On January 24, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* published an exclusive about the ongoing debate about the release of a list of the first names of those that had been arrested on suspicion of having attacked emergency services with fireworks on New Year’s Eve. The AfD’s Ronald Gläser had previously submitted a parliamentary request asking for the first names, which he wanted published in order to find out how many of the arrestees had foreign sounding names, thereby getting what he considered evidence of the rioters largely being migrants. As the city had denied the request with reference to privacy, Gläser and the AfD elected to sue, because, as he is quoted in the article, “what kind of data protection reasons are these? First names are not full names. Nobody can draw conclusions about a specific person” (1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 181). Gläser also tweeted about the article and shared it on his Facebook page, which the pages of the state party and Young Alternative also did (1.2. Neukölln, 178, 179, 182, 183).

Evidence: Nine days before the election, on February 3, the print version of *JUNGE FREIHEIT* featured a lengthy interview with leading candidate and party chairwoman Kristin Brinker, in which she discussed the party’s 10-year-anniversary, her entry into politics, whether after ten years of opposition her party could point to any policy successes, and the lawsuit that led to the court case that annulled the 2021 state election (5. AfD, 42).

Observation: *The investigated outlets frequently published articles that positively discussed the party, shared their statements or let party members write Op-eds for them.*

Evidence: On December 1st, 2022, *PI-News* published a short article under the headline “Gottfried Curio: Faeser’s citizenship law is pure population exchange” that prominently featured an embedded YouTube video from a Bundestag-speech by the MP, in which he vehemently criticized the policy plans. The article discussed the fact that all three coalition parties were on board with the interior minister’s plans and that “the AfD is the only party to pursue an alternative policy for Germans!” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 95).

Evidence: On December 3, *PI-News* posted another short article, featuring an embedded YouTube video of a speech by prominent AfD parliamentarian Beatrix von Storch from her parliamentary group’s topical debate on the topic of “Recognizing the radicalization of climate protests as a threat to the state and society and fighting it consistently and

effectively”. The article’s headline read “AfD MP Beatrix von Storch reckons with climate wackos!” (2.1. Climate Protests, 77).

Evidence: Other similar articles with embedded videos of speeches by AfD members in the *Bundestag*, published by *PI-News* during the campaign were:

- Jürgen Braun castigates the traffic light-coalition’s double standards on China protests (30.11.2022, 5. AfD, 11)
- Bundestag speech by Dr. Curio on the New Year's Eve riots (18.01.2023, 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 170)
- Stephan Brandner: Germany is only world champion in rainbow flags & armbands (20.01.2023, 1.2. Neukölln, World Cup, 84)

Evidence: *PI-News* also shared videos and republished Facebook statuses by well-known party radical Björn Höcke. These were:

- Björn Höcke: Opposition is not for the faint-hearted! (27.11.2022, 5. AfD, 9)
- Björn Höcke: Looking ahead to the coming year with confidence despite all the difficulties (24.12.2022, 5. AfD, 18)
- Björn Höcke: The Power Cartel is at an end (03.01.2023, 5. AfD, 19)
- Review by Björn Höcke: “Let's talk about post-democracy” (09.01.2023, 5. AfD, 23)
- Europe and the nation: Max Krah and Björn Höcke in conversation (31.01.2023, 36)
- Björn Höcke in Erfurt: “Germany must be a force for peace!” (02.02.2023, AfD, 43)

Evidence: After Alice Weidel’s comments making governmental migration policy partially responsible for the bloody attack in Illerkerberg in December, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* and *COMPACT Magazin* both published articles defending her. The former lamented that while the AfD was demanding consequences the political Left told her to “keep your mouth shut” and the latter complained the Media were focusing on the wrong things by attacking her after an “Asylum bloodbath” (1.3. Illerkerberg, 7, 11).

Observation: *The investigated media outlets positively discussed AfD policy proposals and published articles with their criticisms of government plans.*

Evidence: On November 30, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* published an article on the party’s response to the government’s plans to further open the German job market to foreigners by,

among other things, allowing families to join their relatives quicker and simplify the process migrants go through to gain citizenship. The article quoted party chairwoman Alice Weidel stating that “it is an illusion to believe that a Skilled Immigration Act could solve Germany’s labor market problems” and further called the plans “symbolic political window dressing” (5. AfD, 12).

Evidence: In an article from January 17, *Tichys Einblick* noted that a newly published plan by the governing coalition of SPD, Greens, and FDP to reform voting legislation had striking similarities to a 2020 proposal from the AfD, which had been struck down. Both plans sought to reduce the importance of direct versus proportionally won seats. The article’s author noted that he thought it was surprising that other opposition parties like the CDU had so far not attacked the government for copying an AfD proposal (5. AfD, 27).

Evidence: In early February, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* positively reported on an AfD proposal to themselves reform the naturalization process. Planning to return to the legislation that had been in place until reunification in 1991, the proposal would make naturalization a longer and more arduous process than before. The article’s headline poignantly read, “Own legislative proposal – AfD counters Faeser’s facilitation of naturalization” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 290).

Inference: As presented above, the evidence suggests a seemingly coordinated focus on promoting specific narratives about certain topics, such as blaming government policies for crimes committed by migrants, portraying climate protesters as dangerous extremists and defending Germany’s colonial past against perceived attempts to “cancel” it. This alignment indicates a shared effort to shape public perception and policy discussions. Both the right-wing media and AfD social media accounts also consistently proposed similar policy solutions, such as stricter immigration controls and harsher punishments for climate activists. This consistent messaging suggests a coordinated agenda to influence public policy. *JUNGE FREIHEIT* repeatedly getting comments and exclusive stories from Berlin-AfD politicians as well as running a long interview with party chairwoman Brinker right before the election, also suggests that there exist communications and connections between the outlet and the state party. By consistently highlighting the same narratives and proposed solutions, the right-wing media and social media accounts directly reinforced each other’s messages, effectively setting the agenda for their audience and pushing for their preferred policy changes.

Conclusion: H1b proposing that right-wing alternative media outlets and AfD-affiliated social media accounts jointly engaged in *second level agenda setting* by promoting and focusing on the same narratives and solutions is consistently supported by evidence. It passes the *Straw-in-the-Wind*, and *Hoop* tests, which collectively indicate a strong likelihood of coordinated efforts, which is a necessary condition for passing the hypothesis. The direct references and mutual reinforcement between the narratives and proposed media solutions, exemplified by the seemingly coordinated critique of *mainstream media's* handling of the Illerkirchberg and Brokstedt incidents. The hypothesis however fails the *Doubly-Decisive Test* and *Smoking-Gun Test* as there are no documents or other more concrete proof, such as internal documents and E-mails, that could serve as sufficient conditions to show coordinated planning between the different actors. Further investigation with access to internal communications could provide the definitive evidence needed to pass this final test.

Hypothesis 2a: First Level Agenda Building

The selected right-wing alternative media outlets directly influenced what topics social media accounts affiliated with the Berlin-AfD focused on during the election campaign, thus engaging in *first level agenda building* on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate protests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term *culture war*, local news from the city, and stories about the party.

Observation: *AfD accounts frequently shared, promoted, and positively interacted with articles from the investigated outlets, indicating that they read them, support at least some of their editorial positions, and want to promote the same topics.*

Evidence: In total, AfD-affiliated accounts shared 56 articles or in some cases posts from prominent writers, at the six investigated alternative media outlets, which means that 7.6 percent of all social media posts that formed part of the final analysis shared content affiliated with the investigated sites. 49 of these posts linked to articles in *JUNGE FREIHEIT*, three to *PI-News*, three to *Tichys Einblick*, and one to *Achtung, Reichelt!*. The analysis did not find any posts linking to *COMPACT Magazin*, the most notorious and outwardly radical of the outlets. Two of the three posts that shared articles from *PI-News* came from Ronald Gläser and the other one from Frank-Christian Hansel, all three referring to the same article about a demonstration organized by the conservative *Mittelstandsforum e.V.* (SME Forum), which they had both attended (4. Berlin, 78, 89, 96). The posts with links to articles by *Tichys Einblick* came from the Lichtenberg district (06.12.2022), Harald Laatsch (21.12.2022), and Thorsten Weiß (01.01.2023) and all serve as sources for statements about recent news events. These events were the stabbing in Illerkirchberg, the Letzte Generation sawing off the tip of the Christmas tree in front of the Brandenburg-Gate, and the events of New Year's Eve in Neukölln (1.3. Illerkirchberg, 26; 2.1. Climate Protests, 131; 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 12). The post linking to a video from *Achtung, Reichelt!* came from the Neukölln AfD's Twitter/X account, who quote-tweeted a post from Reichelt linking to a documentary he made about their district being a "No-Go-Zone". In the tweet they wrote, "we want #Neukölln. But normal", suggesting that they agreed with the journalist's assessment and sought to address the fact that, according to Reichelt, "violence reigned there not just on New Year's Eve, but every day" (4. Berlin, 201).

The posts that shared articles from the outlets are:

- 17.11.2022 2.1. Climate Protests, 18, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*

- 21.11.2022 3.2. World Cup, 17, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 21.11.2022 4. Berlin, 59, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 21.11.2022 4. Berlin, 72 *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 22.11.2022 4. Berlin, 78, *PI-News*
- 22.11.2022 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 32, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 22.11.2022 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 33, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 23.11.2022 4. Berlin, 89, *PI-News*
- 25.11.2022 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 53, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 25.11.2022 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 56, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 25.11.2022 2.1. Climate Protests, 46, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 29.11.2022 4. Berlin, 111, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 01.12.2022 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 93, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 01.12.2022 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 94, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 06.12.2022 1.3. Illerkirchberg, 26, *Tichys Einblick*
- 09.12.2022 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 126, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 11.12.2022 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 129, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 12.12.2022 4. Berlin, 157, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 14.12.2022 2.1. Climate Protests, 118, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 16.12.2022 4. Berlin (Gen. News), 166, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 20.12.2022 2.1. Climate Protests, 129, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 21.12.2022 2.1. Climate Protests, 131, *Tichys Einblick*
- 22.12.2022 2.1. Climate Protests, 135, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 23.12.2022 4. Berlin, 187, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 01.01.2023 1.2., Neukölln, Riots, on NYE, 12, *Tichys Einblick*
- 02.01.2023 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 22, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 03.01.2023 1.2. Climate Protests, 153, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 04.01.2023 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 66, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 04.01.2023 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 67, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 05.01.2023 4. Berlin, 226, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 06.01.2023 4. Berlin, 232, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 10.01.2023 2.1. Climate Protests, 165, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 10.01.2023 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 223, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*

- 10.01.2023 3.1. Culture War, 97, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 11.01.2023 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 225, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 14.01.2023 4. Berlin, 258, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 18.01.2023 3.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 73, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 18.01.2023 3.2. Lützerath, Eviction, 77, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 19.01.2023 5. AfD (general), 30, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 19.01.2023 5. AfD (general), 32, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 19.01.2023 5. AfD (general), 29, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 19.01.2023 5. AfD (general), 31, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 24.01.2023 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 178, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 24.01.2023 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 179, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 24.01.2023 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NY E, 182, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 24.01.2023 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, 183, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 25.01.2023 4. Berlin, 281, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 25.01.2023 4. Berlin, 282, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 26.01.2023 4. Berlin, 285, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 31.01.2023 5. AfD (general), 38, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 02.02.2023 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 292, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 07.02.2023 3.1. Culture War, 174, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 09.02.2023 4. Berlin (Gen. News), 335, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 09.02.2023 3.1. Culture War, 181, *JUNGE FREIHEIT*
- 10.02.2023 1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE, *Achtung, Reichelt!*

Observation: On several occasions, AfD-affiliated accounts agreeably shared articles from *JUNGE FREIHEIT* that seemed to bring new topics to their attention, suggesting that they look to the site for their news and what issues they should care about.

Evidence: On December 9, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* published a story based on a report by WELT, claiming that interior minister Nancy Faeser did “not want to deport (an) Afghan rapist”, because her ministry had discontinued deportations to the Taliban-ruled country. The man in question had been convicted of taking part in the rape of a 14-year-old girl in 2019 in the village of Illerkirchberg, which had been in the news that week because on December 6, an Eritrean migrant had attacked two schoolgirls with a knife and killed one

of them. Baden-Württemberg's interior minister Marion Gentges had requested the federal ministry to resume "deportations to Afghanistan of dangerous persons and persons who have committed serious crimes" (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 122). AfD politician Tommy Tabor shared this article to his Facebook page on December 9 and wrote that "murderers and rapists are not deported in Germany" (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 126).

Evidence: On December 12, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* ran a story about the Berlin government removing a cross and star from a playground castle, due to the religious symbolism associated with it. The article compared this to the controversial decision to remove the cross and engraved bible verse from the dome of the Berlin City Palace the previous month (4. Berlin, 155). Roland Gläser shared this article on his Twitter/X-account and exasperatedly added that "sick hatred of the Christian West continues to blossom", showing that he viewed the act as part of a larger shift away from important Christian values (3.1. Culture War, 157).

Evidence: On January 10, 2023, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* published an article about the beginning of a trial against a group of refugee aid workers on Lesbos, who were accused of "people smuggling, espionage, money, laundering, (and) founding a criminal organization". One member of the group on trial was the prominent Syrian activist Sarah Bardini, who at the time lived in Berlin. In 2018 she had received the prestigious German Bambi-Award as a "silent heroine" and the story of her flight across the Mediterranean in 2015 was turned into a movie by Netflix. The article was shared the following day by the Facebook page of Berlin's Young Alternative, who wrote a lengthy post claiming that "Greece puts the refugee industry on trial", that the alleged criminal Mardini, "is celebrated by the German establishment", which they criticized because "supporting illegal migration is not a trivial offense and should certainly not be glorified." The post ended with a call for a "Fortress Europe and not open borders!"

Evidence: On December 1, 2022, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* published an article on a recently passed law in Sweden that supposedly tightened up the country's rules for naturalization. Under the headline "In contrast to Germany – Sweden makes citizenship law stricter", the site contrasted this with Germany's approach of planning to allegedly "give away its citizenship" (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 96). The article also went into detail on the role that the right-wing Sweden-Democrats, who at the time were tolerating the country's minority government, had played in drafting the new legislation. The article was shared by the Berlin Young Alternative's Facebook page, which commented that "the left-wing

German government does not hear the European warning shots of neighboring countries” and Frank-Christian Hansel added, that “the new Swedish government with the toleration of the Sweden-Democrats shows how it’s done (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 93, 94).

Inference: AfD-affiliated accounts frequently shared articles from right-wing alternative media outlets, with *JUNGE FREIHEIT* playing a particularly big role. This suggests that they, and with some exceptions, the other investigated platforms influenced the topics that the AfD accounts focused on. *JUNGE FREIHEIT* therefore seems to be playing an outsized role in shaping the agenda of not just the AfD, but potentially of the broader political Right in the country. The act of frequently sharing articles from these sources indicates that the people behind the AfD accounts read those news sites and deemed their topics important enough to promote them to their audience. By sharing and promoting these articles, the AfD-affiliated accounts not only highlighted these topics, but also reinforced the narratives presented by the right-wing media. The shared articles often coincided with significant events or hot-button issues, such as the Iller Kirchberg stabbing and climate protests. This suggests that right-wing media not only influenced the topics but also the timing of when these topics were promoted, aligning with current events to maximize impact. The evidence also shows that the topics shared by AfD accounts consistently aligned with core issues of the party’s platform, such as immigration and cultural identity. This reinforces the idea that right-wing media outlets played a role in setting the agenda on these core issues. The sharing of these articles can also be seen as part of a broader political strategy by the AfD to use right-wing media to bolster their campaign messages. By aligning their social media content with the narratives presented by these media outlets, the AfD could ensure a consistent and resonant message to the presumably large part of their audience that also reads the investigated media outlets.

Conclusion: The hypothesis that right-wing alternative media outlets directly influenced the topics that AfD-affiliated social media accounts focused on during the election campaign, thereby engaging in *first level agenda building*, is supported by some evidence. However, it is not fully conclusive as the amount of evidence that strongly supports the hypothesis is rather limited. The hypothesis does pass the *Straw-in-the Wind* and *Hoop* tests, as the party frequently sharing articles from the investigated outlets and becoming aware of several topics through them is a necessary, but not sufficient condition to accept the hypothesis. The hypothesis does, however, fail the *Smoking-Gun* and *Doubly-Deci-*

sive tests, due to both a lack of sufficiently conclusive supporting evidence and the absence of concrete proof of party accounts being actively influenced by the investigated outlets.

Hypothesis 2b: Second Level Agenda Building

The selected right-wing alternative media outlets directly influenced what narratives and solutions for policy problems accounts affiliated with the Berlin-AfD focused on during the election campaign, thereby engaging in *second level agenda building* through the party on issues surrounding the topics of migration, climate protests, those that can be best subsumed under the umbrella-term Culture War, local news from the city, and stories about the party.

Observation: In November, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* started a petition to pressure the government to address the issue of illegal migration and affect policy change to reduce the number of immigrants applying for and getting asylum in the country, which was immediately picked up and supported by accounts affiliated with AfD Berlin.

Evidence: Right at the start of the campaign, on November 21, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* announced the start of a petition to, in their words, “Stop the asylum crisis (and) end illegal migration!” which gathered 10,000 signatures in just the first day (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 28). The petition contained seven key demands, namely:

1. Close borders for illegal immigrants
2. Strengthen European cooperation
3. Combat traffickers
4. Eliminate financial incentives
5. Enforce the law consistently
6. Reform asylum law
7. Humanitarian aid on the ground

(1.1. Migration and Asylum, 206)

Member of the Chamber of Deputies Frank-Christian Hensel (November 22) and party chairwoman Kristin Brinker (November 25) enthusiastically shared a link to the petition, with Brinker writing “I have signed (...) we have been fighting for these central points of our program for years” and Hensel simply stating, “Take part!” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 32, 33, 56). Later the Facebook page of the district party in Neukölln also promoted the petition, which at that point had gathered over 40,000 signatures (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 129, 116). On January 5, the news site announced that the petition had received the required 50,000 signatures to be submitted to the Bundestag’s *Petitionsausschuss* (Committee on Petitions), which according to parliamentary rules is then required to hear one or several of the main petitioners in a public hearing (1.1. Migration and Asylum,

244). While the petition's content did not widely differ from policy demands that had been part of the AfD's platform previously, AfD accounts reacting to, supporting, and sharing it makes them at least partially a supporter of the site's agenda.

Observation: *AfD accounts seized on criticisms and attacks against opposing politicians that were either unearthed or spread throughout the right-wing alternative media ecosystem.*

Evidence: In early January, a viral Facebook post alleged that there had also been riots in the small town of Borna in Saxony, with two young Germans being taken into custody. What made the story newsworthy was that the post alleged that some the rioters had been chanting far-right slogans, such as the forbidden “Sieg Heil!” and were exclusively of German origin. This news spread throughout the country with media and even politicians, such as SPD-chairman Lars Klingbeil sharply condemning the riots. An inquiry with the local police by *Tichys Einblick* however revealed, that the police had so far not been able to confirm the reports and was still investigating. The article, which ran under the headline “The extremist right-wing New Year’s riot with “Sieg Heil” turns out to be a Facebook fantasy”, went on to claim that it seemed like so many people had been desperate to find a narrative or issue to balance out all the reporting about migrant violence, that they had willfully spread disinformation (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 219). The news that the reports had been inaccurate was immediately picked up the next day by Julian Reichelt, whose video under the title “New intimidation campaign by SPD and Greens: Anyone who doesn't want to be left-wing is Hitler” was also shared on PI-News, which added the headline “SPD leader Klingbeil invents “Sieg Heil” chants” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 220). On January 11, Ronald Gläser shared an article about the incident to his Facebook page with the caption “I shape the world for myself the way I like it” (1.1. Grund, 224). *Tichys Einblick* followed up on their original report on January 11, once again attacking Klingbeil for supposedly knowingly spreading fake news, calling his insistence on talking about the dangers of right-wing violence a “diversionary maneuver” (4. Berlin, 226). *COMPACT Magazin* responded to the situation with an article stating that the SPD-chief seemed to be “going crazy”, and *JUNGE FREIHEIT* explicitly accused him of spreading “fake news” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 232, 237). The outrage against Klingbeil was also shared by the district-party of Neukölln, which shared a statement from MP Sebastian Wippel, who slammed Klingbeil for attempting to divert attention away from the “proven attacks on police officers on New Year’s Eve in Berlin, most of which were carried out

by young migrants” and demanded he immediately apologize (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 239). Because the alleged riot had taken place in Saxony, Klingbeil was also accused of reproducing prejudices against Eastern Germans (14.01.2023, 1.1. Migration and Asylum, 245) and *Tichys Einblick* lamented on January 14, that the “attitude press and associated political bigwigs” had achieved their goals as “we are no longer talking about mass migration and its visible negative consequences” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 248).

Observation: *AfD accounts picked up on news stories and issues that had previously been reported on by the investigated media outlets and took the same stance on them.*

Evidence: Quoting the president of the German Teacher’s Association, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* titled on November 24 under the headline “Educational decline”, that “migration causes drop in performance in schools.” In an interview with *BILD* Heinz-Peter Meidinger had said, that recent PISA-studies had suggested that the higher the percentage of children with an immigrant background “the lower, at least in tendency, the performance level” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 38). On December 8, 2022, Thorsten Weiß, party spokesperson on Education referred to this interview and interpretation in a parliamentary speech, which he and the parliamentary group’s account shared on their Facebook pages. The video was captioned with an apparent quote from Meidinger. Instead of the measured response from the interview, the caption however suggested that he had stated that “a decisive cause of the drop in performance at elementary schools is the fact that over the last 10 years, the number of pupils with a #migration background has risen by over 50 percent” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 119, 120, 121).

Evidence: On November 25, 2022, *Tichys Einblick* published a story under the title “local authority associations warn: accommodation capacities for migrants exhausted”. In the article they quoted a spokesperson from the association who warned that “the municipalities cannot absorb an additional 500,000 people (...) especially as the number of asylum applications is also rising again” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 57). Similarly warning of the looming crisis, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* between November 18 and December 2, published an extensive multi-part series about the “new mass migration”, which detailed how migrants were supposedly finding ever new ways to get themselves to Europe, bribing police officers and border patrol agents or getting smuggled across the Mediterranean on Yachts (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 17, 60, 102). On December 4, COMPACT also warned about the crisis, drawing the comparison to 2015, when Germany had registered over one million migrants. Under the headline “2022 tops 2015” the site lamented that Germany was

on pace to take in “more migrants than in 2015, the year of the Asylum-tsunami” (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 110). While AfD accounts were certainly posting about issues relating to migration around this time, sharing *JUNGE FREIHEIT*s petition and especially criticizing the city’s government the first social media post from an affiliated account that spoke of a crisis and drew parallels to 2015 only came on December 20. In a video statement posted to YouTube, Kristin Brinker warned that “the current development is worse than the illegal migration wave of 2015, which caused lasting damage to our country (1.1. Migration and Asylum, 157, 168).

Observation: *Several AfD accounts shared an article from JUNGE FREIHEIT about allegedly scandalous behavior by vice president of the Bundestag Katrin Göring-Eckardt, who had aggressively reacted to spectators cheering for an AfD speaker.*

Evidence: On January 19, during a parliamentary debate on a resolution about recognizing the attempted genocide of the Yezidi people by the Islamic State in 2014, members of the persecuted group in the audience loudly cheered for a speech by AfD MP Martin Sichert. Katrin Göring-Eckardt of the Greens, who was leading the debate at the time, reprimanded the visitors and pointed out that audience cheers were not allowed, threatening to throw them out if they made noise again. Other members of the parliament also raised their voices and demanded the audience’s expulsion from the house. In their report on the debate, *JUNGE FREIHEIT* described the scenes as members of the green party and other parliamentary groups having “desperate screaming fits” at the cheers for the AfD and neglected to even mention that the resolution had been passed (5. AfD, 28). The same day, this article was shared by the Facebook pages of the Berlin state party and the districts of Lichtenberg and Spandau, with Ronald Gläser tweeting about it (5. AfD, 30, 32, 31, 29). Gläser captioned the article with “I love the red-green double standards” (referring to SPD and Greens), the Spandau district commented that the “old parties were letting their masks slip” and Lichtenberg assessed that it appeared that “Ms. Göring-Eckardt’s nerves seem to be on edge”.

Observation: *Right-wing alternative media scandalized the fact that the Letzte Generation was distributing money and essentially paying its members to engage in activism full time. This outrage and narrative were later echoed by AfD-affiliated accounts.*

Evidence: On January 1, 2023, an investigation by the *WELT am Sonntag* revealed that members of the Letzte Generation were receiving salaries from donations the organization received in order to engage in activism full time. This report was picked up by

reitschuster.de, who polemicized that the activists were receiving “money for the uprising” and that the organization was organized extremely hierarchically and also harbored apparent sympathies for left-wing extremism (2.1. Climate Protests, 146). Harald Laatsch, who shared the WELT-report on his Twitter account the following day mirrored Reitschuster’s outrage, calling the activists “criminals with a salary” and lamented that “there could hardly be more evidence of (them being) a criminal organization (2.1. Climate Protests, 150). *COMPACT Magazin*’s article on the matter ran under the headline “fat salaries for climate terrorists” and five days later, on January 7, reemphasized their outrage at the fact that “climate-wackos” were receiving “wages for gluing” themselves to the ground (2.1 Climate Protests, 151, 162).

Inference: The evidence does suggest that right-wing alternative media outlets did have some, although minor, direct influence on the narratives that AfD-affiliated social media accounts focused on during the campaign. The sharing and promotion of articles and the migration-petition from *JUNGE FREIHEIT* indicate that the outlet had some impact on the narratives the party promoted, particularly surrounding the topic of migration, such as the need to address the asylum crisis and implement stricter immigration policies. By picking up on and amplifying criticisms and attacks against opposing politicians unearthed or spread by right-wing media, AfD accounts engaged in reinforcing, spreading, and legitimizing these narratives. This included stories like the attacks on Lars Klingbeil for falling for a fake Facebook post about right-wing riots in Borna, and on Katrin Göring-Eckardt for asking Yezidi visitors to parliament to keep quiet during debate. By situationally adopting and amplifying the narratives from right-wing media, AfD accounts likely helped the outlets influence both their political base, as well as the broader public discourse. If successful, this would solidify the party’s position on key issues and should help align public perceptions with their political goals.

Conclusion: The hypothesis that right-wing alternative media outlets directly influenced the narratives and solutions that AfD-affiliated social media accounts promoted during the election campaign, which would constitute *second level agenda building*, is only supported by very limited evidence. AfD-affiliated accounts supporting and promoting *JUNGE FREIHEIT*’s petition passes the *Straw-in-the-Wind* test, as it indicates that the hypothesis is plausible, but the very limited number of other strong examples of the media clearly influencing the Berlin-branch’s agenda lessens the causal inference that can be

drawn from this. In these very limited instances, particularly on topics related to migration, the hypothesis also passes the *Hoop* test, as there exists some amount of evidence that can be described as necessary for passing the hypothesis. The hypothesis does however clearly fail the *Smoking-Gun* and *Doubly-Decisive* tests, and other explanations must be actively considered.

Appendix B: Charts and Figures

Figure 8: Sources of Articles, Right-Wing Alternative Media Outlets (A)

Berlin State Election 2022/23 Campaign, 16.11.2022 - 12.02.2023. Number of Selected Articles

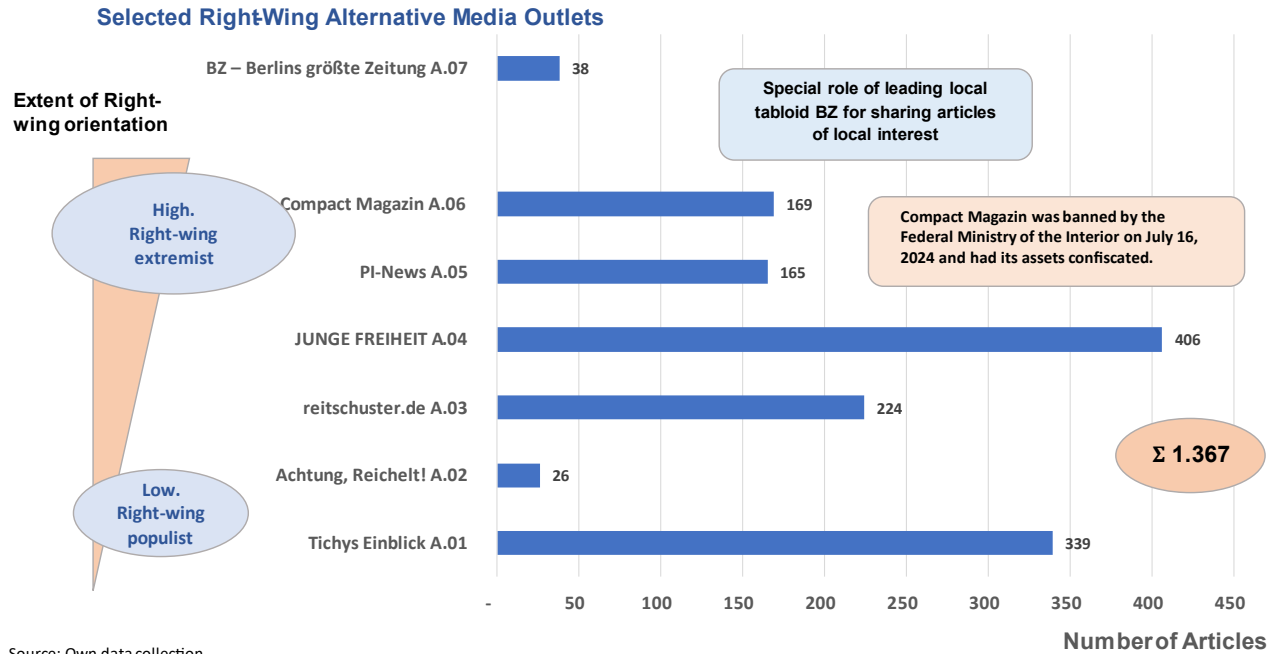


Figure 8: Sources of Articles, Right-Wing Alternative Media Outlets (A)

Figure 9: AfD Social Media Accounts (B, C, D)

Berlin State Election 2022/23 Campaign, 16.11.2022 - 12.02.2023. Number of Selected Social Media Posts

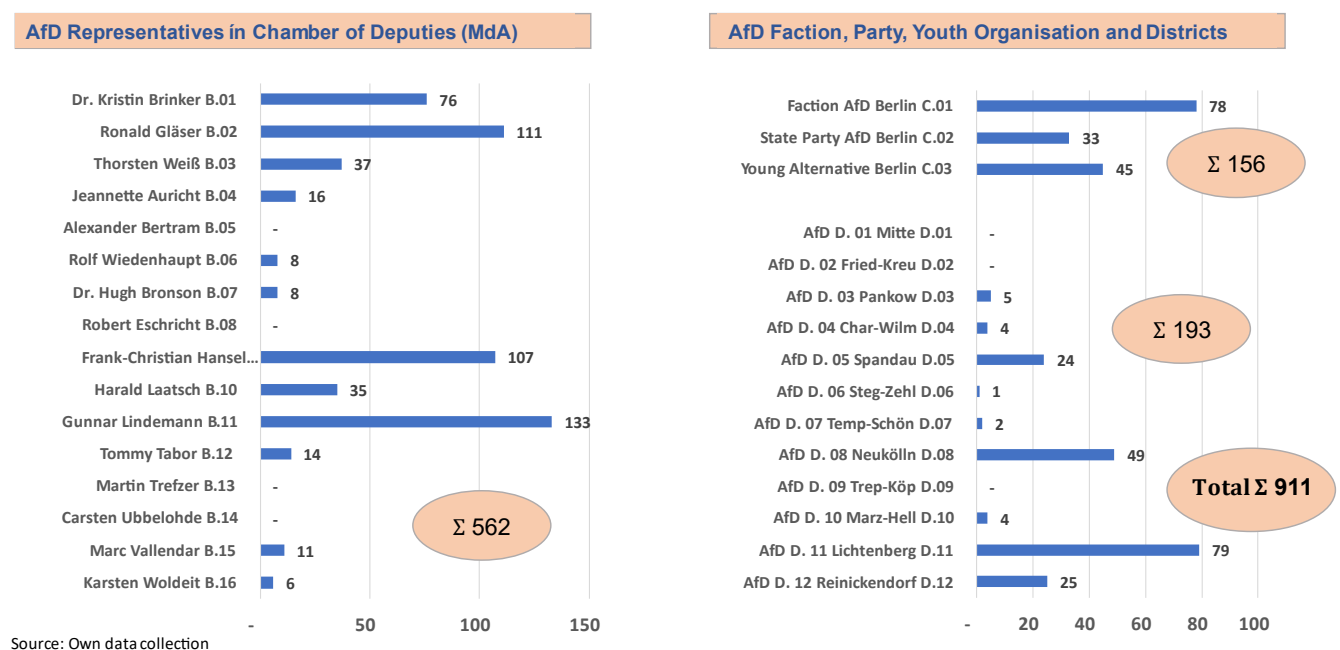


Figure 9: AfD Social Media Accounts (B, C, D)

Figure 10: Media Articles and Social Media Posts by Main Topic

Berlin State Election 2022/23 Campaign, 16.11.2022 - 12.02.2023. Number of Investigated Articles and Social Media Posts
Main Topics Selected and Grouped

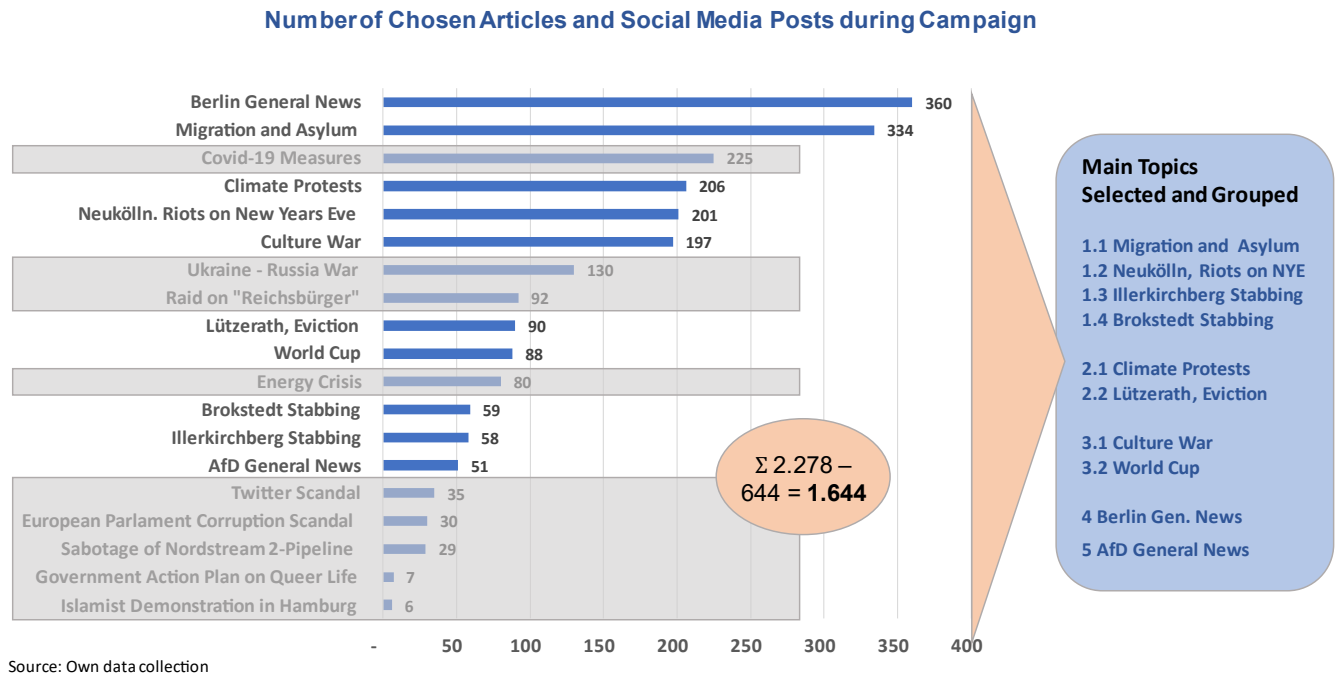
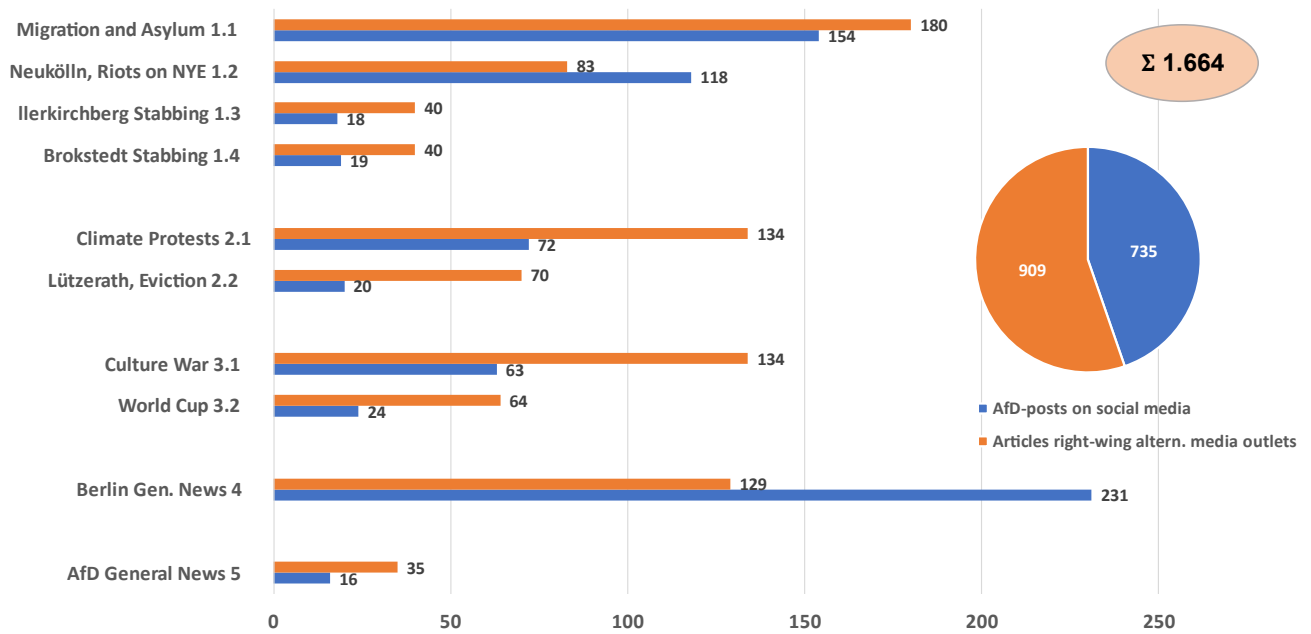


Figure 10: Media Articles and Social Media Posts by Main Topic

Figure 11: Split of Articles vs. Social Media Posts per Main Topic/in Total

Berlin State Election 2022-23 Campaign, 16.11.2022 - 12.02.2023.

Number of Chosen Articles and Social Media Posts during Campaign



Source: Own data collection and analysis

Figure 11: Split of Articles vs. Social Media Posts per Main Topic/in Total

Appendix C: Database

Figure 12: Overview Database in Excel with 17 Sheets

Code of Sheet	Name of Sheet	Full Name of Sheet	Codes in Sheet	Type of Content	Quantity of Content	No. of Subtopics	Important
0	0. Analyses and Charts			Numbers for analyses and graphs made with Excel for figures in text and appendix			
All	All. Sources, Articles & Posts			All articles and posts by source	Total of all 2.278 articles and posts		9 columns for each of 31 sources (7+12+3+ 9), next to one another
Description of Sources							
A	A. R.-W. Alt. Media Outlets	Right-Wing Alternative Media Outlets	A.01 - A.07	Descriptive information	7 lines, 1 per media outlet		
B	B. AfD Reps. SM	Social Media Accounts of AfD Representatives	B.01 - B16	Descriptive information	16 lines, 1 per AfD Reps. (4 without SM posts)		
C	C. Other AfD-Acc. SM	Social Media Accounts affiliated with the AfD	C.01 - C.03	Descriptive information	3 lines, 1 per AfD-affiliated organ. with SM accounts		
D	D. AfD Districts SM	Social Media Accounts of AfD Districts in Berlin	D.01 - D.12	Descriptive information	12 lines, 1 per AfD District (3 without SM posts)		
Main Topics							
1.1	1.1. Migration and Asylum			Articles and posts under 1.1	334	20	Links to all articles and posts (column C)
1.2	1.2. Neukölln, Riots on NYE	Neukölln, Riots on New Year's Eve		Articles and posts under 1.2	291	12	Links to all articles and posts (column C)
1.3	1.3. Illerkerberg Stabbing			Articles and posts under 1.3	58	8	Links to all articles and posts (column C)
1.4	1.4. Brokstedt Stabbing			Articles and posts under 1.4	59	7	Links to all articles and posts (column C)
2.1	2.1. Climate Protests			Articles and posts under 2.1	206	18	
2.1	2.2. Lützerath	Lützerath, Eviction (of pro-climate squat)		Articles and posts under 2.2	90	12	
3.1	3.1. Culture War			Articles and posts under 3.1	197	15	
3.2	3.2. World Cup			Articles and posts under 3.2	88	6	
4	4. Berlin Gen. News	Berlin General News		Articles and posts under 4	360	19	
5	5. AfD Gen. News	AFD General News		Articles and posts under 5	51	6	
Z	Z. Master Main Topics - no Links			All articles and posts selected	Selected 1.644 in 10 defined Main Topics		Undemeath each other to be analyzed in total, but no more links to articles/posts

Source: Own data collection

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare on my honor that this master's thesis, supervised by by Prof. Evelyne Hübscher and Prof. Fulya Apaydin, was written independently and without outside help. The use of verbatim quotations and the use of other authors' ideas has been indicated at the appropriate places in the thesis.

Barcelona/Munich, July 31st, 2024

SIGNATURE